Taking the Helm: Genealogical Debunking Arguments, Moral Realism, and the Possibility of Moral Knowledge

by

Joshua D. McBee

A dissertation submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Baltimore, Maryland

April 2019

Abstract

Genealogical debunking arguments aim to show that, given their provenance, none of our moral beliefs are justified, at least assuming moral realism. In particular, they claim that this is so because the best, complete explanation of why we hold the moral beliefs we do neither presupposes nor entails their truth. I dispute this explanatory claim, suggesting instead that, in at least some cases, the best explanation of our beliefs must appeal to our capacity to acquire moral knowledge through reflection. To defend this suggestion, I respond to three different rejoinders debunkers might offer. One of these contends that the proposed explanation is redundant: if we want to explain why someone judges some action wrong, all we need to know is the character of their moral sensibilities. Two other rejoinders appeal to general skeptical challenges. According to the first, if realism is true, the evidence available to us in reflection necessarily underdetermines the truth of our ethical beliefs. Like the so-called Benacerraf-Field challenge to mathematical platonism from which it derives, the second challenge involves two distinct charges: first, that knowledge requires there be a causal or explanatory connection between our beliefs and the facts that realism precludes, and second, that realists cannot explain our reliability in ethics. Making novel use of Ludwig Wittgenstein's remarks about following rules, I argue that that each of the first two rejoinders rests on a confused view about the ways we are liable to go wrong in ethical reflection. In response to the third rejoinder, I

argue that while the no-accident condition on knowledge is indeed best understood in explanatory terms, realism does not preclude the possibility that our beliefs might satisfy this condition on knowledge; in addition, I explain how realists can explain our reliability in ethics. In all of these cases, moreover, I suggest that the responses I outline are open *only* to proponents of a deflationary form of realism that, following Amie Thomasson, I call "simple realism," conceding to debunkers that their arguments are likely unanswerable by proponents of more inflationary or so-called "robust" forms of realism.

Committee: Dean Moyar (primary advisor), Richard Bett (second reader), Chris Lebron, Mark Lance, and Andrew Miller (chair)

For Dot and Nini

Acknowledgements

You could say I first began thinking about the issues I take up here in fall 2012, when I first encountered Street's Darwinian Dilemma while reading Parfit's *On What Matters*. But I've been thinking about much of this in one way or another for far longer. Maybe it would be best to date it back to Christmas 2007, when my brother recommended a book from an introductory philosophy class he had taken the semester before, Russ Shafer-Landau's *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* Or maybe it would be better to say I started thinking along these lines a couple of years later, in early 2009, when I had my first encounter with Wittgenstein's later work in Carl Sachs' epistemology class at the University of North Texas. In any case, these things have been on my mind a long time, and I've acquired many debts along the way.

In particular, I want to thank Dean Moyar and Richard Bett, both for providing invaluable verbal and written feedback and for supporting me in many other ways throughout the process; the Johns Hopkins University Department of Philosophy for funding, especially for the Barnhart and Sachs dissertation completion fellowships that gave me the time I needed to pull my thoughts together during the final stages of the project; Carl Sachs for encouraging my interest in Wittgenstein all those years ago and for his friendship and mentorship ever since; Ian Moore for helpful

discussion of *Blood Meridian*, as well as for a philosophical friendship that has been a consistent delight for more than ten years now; Steven Gross for invaluable discussions of contextualism, nonsense, and realism; Louis Gularte, Mario Brandhorst, and other audience members who provided helpful feedback at the 3rd conference on Wittgensteinian Approaches in Moral Philosophy in Leuven; and, for helpful discussion and reading recommendations at various points, Mark Lance, Tom Wilk, Nandi Theunissen, Elanor Taylor, Justin Bledin, Kevin Powell, Itai Marom, Alex James, Patrick O'Donnell, Daniel Estrada, Dan Korman, Kieran Setiya, Josef Simpson, Nikola Andonovski, Micah Lott, David Killoren, Cara Cummings, and Sharon Street.

Of course, a project this size doesn't take place in a vacuum. It has been a part of my life for many years now and was only possible because I managed to make it into graduate school in the first place and, thereafter, stick with it. Many people helped make all that possible. In particular I want to mention Adam Reid, who was kind enough to drink and commiserate with me after my disastrous first topical; David Jacobs, whose friendship and lifting tips have helped keep me sane; Tim Lowery, who has been a reliable companion for twenty years; Angela Hvitved and Damian Dalle Nogare, with whom I'm so glad we've become such good friends; and many other friends whose company has sustained me in various ways throughout the process, including David Lindeman, Alex, Luise, Anton, Aimee, Richard and Megan Lowery, Richard Teague, Shelley, Mike, Sandy, Lisa, Dan, Kasey, and Wes. Finally, I want to thank my family. In particular, I want to thank Ingrid, Jose, Miren, Sabina, and Amelia, whose presence in my life over the last few years has been a joy; my Texas family generally, but especially Mom, Jonathan, Hillary, and Hailey, who have been so consistently supportive and encouraging, and Papa, the first Dr. McBee, and to whom all the cowboy examples are a sort of tribute; and, most importantly, I want to thank Erika, without whose love, support, and encouragement I may well have left the program a long time ago, and without whom life would undoubtedly be worse.

Writing this, I am touched by how many people have gone out of their way to help me in one way or another or in some other way supported or encouraged me these past eight years. From the bottom of my heart, thank you all.

Table of Contents

Introduction

> But then with me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?
>
> -Darwin to W. Graham, July 3rd, 1881[1]

Though he does express the thought in an unusually colorful way, Darwin was neither the first nor the last to think facts about their provenance give us reason to be suspicious of our beliefs. Nietzsche's claims in *On the Genealogy of Morality* that Christian moral beliefs originated in *ressentiment* are meant to undermine those beliefs, just as Freud's claim in *The Future of an Illusion* that religious beliefs are a form of wish fulfillment are meant to undermine them. Similarly, Marx's claim in *The German Ideology* that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" is meant to

[1] Darwin correspondence project number 13230, quoted at Fraser, "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments and the Reliability of Moral Cognition," p. 457.

debunk prevailing moral, political, and economic ideas by suggesting that they reflect, not moral, political, and economic reality, but the class interests of the bourgeoisie.[2] More recently, several philosophers, most prominently Sharon Street and Richard Joyce, have followed in Darwin's footsteps, suggesting that their evolutionary origins should lead us to doubt our moral beliefs or to regard them as unjustified.[3]

In all of these cases, the impetus is an observation about the source of our beliefs or about the influences that shape or explain why we hold the beliefs we do. Notice, though, that the mere fact that our beliefs have a history or are shaped in all sorts of ways does not by itself entail that they are untrustworthy, unjustified, or in some other way epistemically suspect. Far from it; in fact, information about the sources of or influences on our beliefs can often *vindicate* or *justify* them. Suppose, for instance, that a friend tells me the twin prime conjecture is false. Though I am not familiar with the details, I am under the impression that twin prime conjecture is an unproven mathematical theorem, and since I have no reason to think my non-mathematician friend knows anything more about the conjecture than I do, I might wonder whether she has good reason to believe as she does. However, were she to explain that earlier in the day she had read an article in *The Washington Post* in which a prominent mathematician claimed to have disproven the conjecture, I would not only cease to be suspicious but would come to regard my friend's belief as justified and likely true. In other cases, of course, information about the provenance of some belief does serve to undermine it. This would be so if my friend had instead answered that he decided the conjecture was false by flipping a coin.

---

[2] On Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, see Brian Leiter, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Recovering Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud." The quotation from *The German Ideology* comes from part I, section B of that work, in the sub-section entitled "Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas."

[3] See Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value" and Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*. Other evolutionary debunking arguments include, *inter alia*, Michael Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously*, ch. 6; Gilbert Harman, *Thinking How to Live*, ch. 13; Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*, part II; Braddock, "Debunking Arguments from Insensitivity"; Locke, "Darwinian Normative Skepticism"; Justin Horn, "Evolution and the Epistemological Challenge to Moral Realism"; and Matt Lutz, "What Makes Evolution a Defeater."

What accounts for the difference between these cases is the nature of the belief sources cited in each. In the first case, where information about the provenance of my friend's belief serves to exculpate and justify it, she forms her belief about the twin prime conjecture after coming across expert testimony on the subject. In the second, by contrast, she forms her belief by flipping a coin. These two influences on my friend's belief differ with respect to their relationship to its truth: whereas the testimony of mathematicians is generally a reliable guide to truth in mathematics, the result of a coin flip has nothing whatsoever to do with the truth of the twin prime conjecture. We can call *salutary* those influences on the content of our beliefs that, like the first, push us toward the truth; by contrast, those that influence the content of our beliefs in ways that have nothing to do with their truth—influences like that of a coin flip—are *irrelevant*.[4] Plausibly, that a belief is explained by salutary influences gives us reason to think it justified or likely to be true; by contrast, when we have reason to think it a product of irrelevant influences, we ought to regard it as unjustified or likely false. Similarly, if we learn that *all* of someone's beliefs of some sort are subject to one or the other type of influence, we should take them to be reliable or unreliable about that sort of thing, respectively. If my friend were to reveal that she forms *all* of her mathematical beliefs by flipping coins, for instance, I should think twice before asking her for help calculating the tip.

Recall now Darwin's "horrid doubt." Its source, it would seem, was the perfectly sensible view that evolution is an irrelevant influence on the content of our beliefs. If that's right, Darwin wonders, how can we take ourselves we are reliable about *anything*? Similarly, Nietzsche takes it that *ressentiment* is an irrelevant influence on the content of Christians' moral beliefs, just as Freud and Marx take it that beliefs that have their origin in wish fulfillment or the class interests of the bourgeoisie are just as likely to be true as not.

Though my remarks in the chapters to follow do have some bearing on these other

[4] I take this latter term from Katia Vavova; see her "Irrelevant Influences."

arguments, they will not be my focus here. Rather, my topic is the so-called evolutionary debunking arguments that have recently garnered a good deal of attention in the literature. Different evolutionary debunking arguments differ in their details, but all of them begin with the observation that our moral beliefs are to a significant extent shaped by the apparently irrelevant influence of natural selection and attempt to leverage that observation to cast doubt on the epistemic credentials of our moral beliefs. Some maintain that these influences *explain* why we hold the moral beliefs we do and conclude, on that basis, that none of our moral beliefs are justified. Others note that, since they push us toward whichever judgments they do whatever the truth may be, the cumulative effect of these influences is more likely than not to distort our moral vision, so to speak—to shape us such that judgments that are not in fact true strike us plausible or even obviously correct. As a result, they conclude, we are almost certainly wildly unreliable about moral matters.

In what follows, I distinguish several different evolutionary debunking arguments, arguing that, ultimately, none are compelling. Along the way I develop a novel, broadly Wittgensteinian view about what we might call the limits of moral discourse—that is, about the kind of moral questions we can intelligibly raise and the kinds of moral claims we can intelligibly make. Drawing on this conception, I suggest that two of the three most compelling versions of the debunking challenge depend on the possibility of asking questions and making claims that in fact cannot be made intelligible. In response to the third version of the debunking challenge I take up, I side with a handful of philosophers and set myself against much recent work in epistemology by arguing that the no-accident condition on knowledge is best understood in explanatory terms and defend a novel, teleological proposal as to how moral beliefs can satisfy that condition. Finally, I flesh out this suggestion by explaining how we can acquire moral knowledge through reflection even if moral facts are objective or mind-independent.

I begin in chapter one by setting out the debunking challenge in detail and explaining why

only three of the five evolutionary debunking arguments I distinguish are plausible enough to merit extensive discussion. I go on, in chapter two, to develop a rejoinder to the first two of these, in the drawing process drawing on Wittgenstein's famous remarks on rule-following. In my third chapter I address the third of the three evolutionary debunking arguments I think worthy of consideration, and finally, in chapter four, I take up and respond to a variety of objections to my response to debunkers.

As I hope will become clear, my discussion here amounts to a defense of the possibility of critical ethical reflection and, thereby, of genuine epistemic agency. Evolutionary and other irrelevant influences on our ethical beliefs notwithstanding, I argue, it is possible to acquire knowledge of objective ethical facts through reflection and, consequently, to distinguish salutary from irrelevant influences on our moral thinking. We accordingly need not be the epistemic equivalents of a boat whose captain has absconded, buffeted about by forces utterly beyond our control and landing wherever the wind and the tides push us.[5] Instead we can take the helm, thinking carefully about whether or not to indulge our various inclinations with a view to ensuring that our beliefs match the facts. And, with enough hard work a bit of luck, we may even manage it.

[5] Since its use by Street at "Darwinian Dilemma," p. 121, this image has made frequent appearances in the literature on evolutionary debunking arguments.

1

The Debunking Challenge

The primary task of this this first chapter is to introduce the debunking challenge to which the next three develop a response. I begin in §1.1 by laying out the first of the three main versions of that challenge that have received significant amounts of attention in the literature; then, in §1.2, I further develop this first argument by considering the ways its proponents might respond to an obvious objection. In §1.3, I introduce the second and third types of debunking argument that have been discussed in the literature, explaining why I do not plan to engage with them in much detail. Next, in §1.4, I say a bit about how the challenge might be generalized beyond the moral domain. Finally, in §1.5, I turn my attention to the notion of objectivity and briefly sketch out the deflationary form of realism I will be concerned to defend against debunkers. As a whole, the chapter serves not just to introduce and clarify the problem to which I mean to respond but also motivate my particular framing of it.

1.1. Debunking Argument 1: Explaining Beliefs

The most compelling and probably best-known version of the debunking challenge attempts to

leverage some sort of explanatory claim about our moral thinking to show that all of our moral judgments are, in one way or another, in bad shape. In the following passage from Joyce's *The Evolution of Morality*, for example, the explanatory claim appears to be focused on why we form the moral beliefs we do, and the conclusion is that none of our moral judgments are justified and that we should accordingly suspend judgment as to their truth:

> We have an empirically well-confirmed theory about where our moral judgments come from…. This theory doesn't state or imply that they are true, it doesn't have as a background assumption that they are true, and, importantly, their truth is not surreptitiously buried in the theory by virtue of any form of moral naturalism. This amounts to the discovery that our moral beliefs are products of a process that is entirely independent of their truth, which forces the recognition that we have no grounds one way or the other for maintaining these beliefs. They *could* be true, but we have no reason for thinking so. Thus we should, initially, cultivate an open mind in order to go and find some other more reliable grounds for either believing or disbelieving moral propositions.[1]

Joyce's is the best-known version, but many people have made or discussed similar arguments, among them Allan Gibbard, Philip Kitcher, Matthew Braddock, Dustin Locke, and most recently, Matt Lutz.[2]

Similarities notwithstanding, different iterations of this argument differ in a variety of ways. Thus, on some variants, the explanatory claim is simply that we *can* explain why we form the moral judgments we do without presupposing their truth or making any reference to moral facts, while on others it is that we can provide a *complete* explanation of this sort or that the *best* complete explanation of why we form the moral beliefs we do is like this. Moreover, in some cases, the explanandum is, not why we form the particular moral beliefs we do, but why our moral sensibilities are as they are, or in other words, why certain moral propositions strike us as plausible while others

[1] Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, p. 211.
[2] See Harman, *Thinking How to Live*, ch. 13; Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*, part II; Braddock, "Debunking Arguments from Insensitivity"; Locke, "Darwinian Normative Skepticism"; and Lutz, "What Makes Evolution a Defeater." Locke attributes an argument of this sort to Street, but as I indicate in §1.3 below, I am not convinced this is the right way to read her.

do not.[3] And while all go on to suggest it follows that our moral judgments are in some way bad off, different iterations differ as to the exact respect in which this is supposed to be the case. Thus, some conclude that we ought to suspend judgment about the truth of or withhold belief from all moral propositions, some that none of our moral beliefs are justified, and still others that all of them are defeated.[4] Finally, while some versions of the argument suggest that the explanatory claim *directly* entails the debunking conclusion, others maintain that it does so only by way of its implications for some allegedly epistemically significant modal connection between our beliefs and the facts. In that case, the argument would go something like this:

1. The best complete explanation of why we make the ethical judgments we do does not presuppose their truth.
2. If the best complete explanation of why we make the ethical judgments we do does not presuppose their truth, the belief-forming processes that lead us to make those judgments are highly insensitive; i.e., they would lead us to form the same beliefs even if those beliefs were false.
3. So the belief-forming processes that lead us to make those judgments are highly insensitive. (1, 2)
4. But if those processes are insensitive, they are unreliable.
5. So all of our belief-forming processes are unreliable. (3, 4)
6. If we know that the processes whereby we form our beliefs are unreliable, we are not justified in continuing to hold those beliefs.
7. So we are not justified in holding any ethical beliefs. (5, 6)[5]

Clearly, possibilities abound.

Fortunately for would-be anti-debunkers like myself, it is possible to extract from all of this variety a single argument that, without distortion, accurately represents the thought behind all of these different versions. To explain how, I'll take the various axes along which the argument can vary one by one.

---

[3] In his "What Makes Evolution a Defeater," pp. 1110-1111, Matt Lutz endorses the latter formulation, but most other formulations seem to go with the former.

[4] For the first, see Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, ch. 6 and Korman and Locke, "Against Minimalist Responses"; for the second, see Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, ch. 6 and Korman, "Debunking Arguments in Metaethics and Metaphysics"; for the last, see Locke, "Darwinian Normative Skepticism" and Lutz, "What Makes Evolution a Defeater."

[5] This is a simplified version of the argument outlined by Matthew Braddock in his "Debunking Arguments from Insensitivity." As Braddock effectively shows, the step from (3)-(5) would need to be quite a bit more complicated than this argument suggests; for details, see "Debunking Arguments," §4, esp. pp. 101-102. For my purposes, though, these complications would just be a distraction.

We can start with the possibility just mooted, that the explanatory claim may only entail the debunking conclusion by way of its modal implications. In a series of recent papers, Dan Korman, Dustin Locke, and Matt Lutz have argued that this modal detour is unnecessary.[6] For, they argue, while some potential modal connections between our beliefs and the facts might well be epistemically significant, evidence that there is no explanatory connection between our beliefs and the facts—that is, evidence that it is the case neither that our beliefs explain the facts nor that the facts explain our beliefs—is *by itself* defeating. That is to say, if we learn that we are forming beliefs about some domain, D, in a way that has nothing to do with the D-facts, that discovery is sufficient *all on its own* to render our D-beliefs unjustified. I think these philosophers are right about this, and so, going forward, I will not worry about any intervening modal steps some might wish to introduce into the argument.

This conclusion suggests a way of reconciling another disagreement among debunkers, about what the relevant explanandum is. If Korman, Locke, and Lutz are right, the crucial thing for debunkers to provide is evidence that there is no explanatory connection between our moral beliefs and the facts. What sort of evidence would suffice for that purpose? Plausibly, precisely the sort debunkers have provided, namely evidence that we can explain why we form the moral beliefs we do in ways that do not presuppose or entail the truth of our beliefs. This might seem like bad news for those debunkers who have thought the relevant explanandum was instead our moral sensibilities; in fact, though, these various versions are not so far apart, since explanations of these latter types straightforwardly entail explanations of why we form the particular moral beliefs we do. Thus, an explanation of our moral sensibilities—of why certain beliefs strike us true and others false—rather straightforwardly entails an explanation of why we form the judgements we do. Moreover, it is only because this is so that explanations of our moral sensibilities might provide evidence that there is no

[6] See Korman, "Debunking Arguments"; Korman and Locke, "Against Minimalist Responses"; and Lutz, "What Makes Evolution a Defeater."

explanatory connection between our beliefs and the facts. I accordingly conclude that this version of the debunking argument is best understood as resting on a claim about what explains why we form the moral beliefs we do.

What about that explanation though? Does it matter if it is complete, or the best complete explanation available, or is it enough for the debunkers' purposes that we *can* provide explanations of our moral beliefs that neither entail nor presuppose their truth? I think the debunker has to claim that it is the *best* complete explanation of our beliefs that is like this. It would not do for it to be the case *only* that some explanations of our beliefs neither entail nor presuppose their truth, for in that case anti-debunkers might simply note that some other explanation does and ask why we should prefer the debunker's favored explanation over this other one (more on what an explanation of this sort might look like in the next section). Similarly if the debunker were to claim that there is a complete explanation of our moral beliefs of the relevant sort. Here again, the anti-debunker might simply note that there is a competing, equally complete explanation of our beliefs that does entail their truth and invite the debunker to offer some reason why we should prefer her non-fact-involving explanation over this other one. In short, debunkers must claim, not only that *there are* explanations of our moral beliefs that neither presuppose nor entail their truth or even that these explanations are *complete*. In addition, they must maintain that some such explanation of our moral beliefs is *the best* complete explanation available. More likely than not, most debunkers realize this, and formulations that suggest otherwise are just misleading shorthand.

This brings us, finally, to the conclusion. Recall the options I mentioned earlier: debunkers might argue that we ought to suspend judgment about the truth of or withhold belief from all moral propositions, that none of our moral beliefs are justified, or that all of our beliefs are defeated. Which is it? In a way, I think, all of them. For, notice, these three conclusions are intimately related to one another: if our moral beliefs are defeated, none of them are justified, and we ought to

suspend judgment about the truth of or withhold belief from all moral propositions. For this reason, I doubt that these differences in formulation signal any substantive disagreements between debunkers.

These considerations suggest a way of understanding this first style of debunking argument that should be acceptable to everyone involved. Following Korman and Locke, let us say that, for any proposition P that is about a domain D,

The belief that P is *e-connected* iff it is explained by or explains some facts in D,

Then we might put the argument like this:

1. If S believes that her belief that P is not e-connected, then S's belief that P is not justified, and S is rationally committed to withholding belief that P.[7]
2. Realists are committed to denying that our moral beliefs explain the moral facts.
3. Realists might therefore affirm that our moral beliefs are e-connected only by affirming that those facts explain our beliefs
4. However, there is compelling evidence that that is not the case. In particular, the best, complete explanation of why we form the moral beliefs we do—namely, a broadly Darwinian one—neither presupposes nor entails their truth.
5. Realists, then, are committed to denying that our moral beliefs are e-connected.
6. Assuming realism, none of our moral beliefs are justified, and, for every moral proposition P, we are rationally committed to withholding belief that P.

There is an important question as to how exactly we should understand "realism," and I will discuss it at length in a moment (§1.5). For now, I'll just try to clarify a couple of the less straightforward premises.

Premise (1). The intuitive idea here is straightforward: if you learn that you are forming beliefs about some subject matter in ways or for reasons that have nothing to do with facts about that subject matter, your beliefs are thereby undermined, leaving you with no rational basis on which to maintain them. This is what gives Joyce's well-known belief pill example its bite. Were I to learn that I only believe Napoleon lost at Waterloo because, some time ago, someone slipped me a pill that caused me to form that belief, I should suspend judgment about how Napoleon fared at Waterloo,

[7] This is a slightly modified version of the relevant claim in Korman and Locke, "Against Minimalist Responses," §8; cf. Korman, "Debunking Arguments," §8.

at least until I have taken the antidote and can return to the question with fresh eyes.[8] Similarly for realizing that the verdicts of the magic 8-ball have no explanatory connection to facts about whether or not my crush likes me. Alas, I'll have to take another tack.[9]

Some might worry here that this first premise is going to have implausible implications regarding certain kinds of beliefs, such as those formed by induction. For instance, I believe that the sun will rise tomorrow because it has done so every day since I was born and, by all accounts, every day before I was born as well. Yet my belief that the sun will rise tomorrow does not explain the fact that it will, nor—barring backward causation—does that fact explain my belief. Yet surely I ought not for that reason to withhold belief as to whether or not the sun will rise tomorrow!

This would indeed be a decisive objection to the following, stronger claim:

> If S believes that her belief that P neither explains nor is explained by the fact that P, then S is thereby rationally committed to withholding belief that P.

But it does not count at all against premise (1) of this first debunking argument, which is considerably weaker. Unlike this stronger claim, premise (1) holds, not that we must withhold belief that P if we learn that our belief that P neither explains nor is explained by the corresponding P-fact, but that we must do so if we learn that our belief that P neither explains nor is explained by *any* facts in the domain, D, that P is about. Given that my belief that the sun will rise tomorrow is based on and so explained by sunrise-facts—namely, facts about whether or not they have occurred in the past—premise (1) does not in fact entail that I am rationally committed to withholding belief as to what the sun will do tomorrow morning.[10]

Premise (2). On any plausible conception of the realism/anti-realism distinction, the suggestion that our beliefs or, for that matter, any other psychological facts *explain* moral facts is

[8] Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, pp. 179ff. I've modified the example slightly. In Joyce's own example, the pill causes you to form beliefs about Napoleon at random rather than to form this specific belief because Joyce is interested in thinking about what explains our tendency to form beliefs of some sort rather than about why we form particular beliefs. As I've indicated, however, I doubt this difference makes a difference.

[9] I take this latter example from Korman and Locke, "Against Minimalist Responses," §2.

[10] Cf. Korman and Locke, "Against Minimalist Responses," §9.

antithetical to realism. Consider, for example, the view that, for any x, x is good only if, and because, I believe that x is good. This is a paradigmatic subjectivist (and so anti-realist) view. Any attempt by realists to resist the conclusion that we are rationally committed to withholding from all moral beliefs by endorsing views of this sort would therefore amount to an admission that they cannot do so without abandoning their position.

Premise (4). As I've noted, a variety of explanations are possible here, but for the purposes of illustration it will suffice to mention just one, Joyce's in *The Evolution of Morality*. Joyce thinks the best, complete explanation of our tendency to make the moral judgments we do is evolutionary. Roughly speaking, the idea is that helping behavior evolved because it tended to promote reproductive fitness. Similarly, we developed the tendency to talk and think in terms of categorical moral concepts like obligation and prohibition because talking and thinking in those terms tended to bolster our motivation to engage in helping behavior and so to make us more reliable cooperators than we would be were we motivated purely by self-interest or sympathy. Given the individual and group fitness benefits resulting from reliable co-operation, natural selection favored the psychological dispositions and mechanisms that give rise to a tendency to form judgments employing categorical moral concepts given normal environmental cues.[11] Notably, this explanation nowhere presupposes the truth of any ethical claims.

Importantly, this premise might be true even if this particular evolutionary hypothesis turns out to be false. For as I noted above, our moral beliefs appear subject to a variety of what in the introduction I called irrelevant influences, including but by no means limited to evolutionary ones. So long as the best, complete explanation of our making the moral judgments we do draws *only* on irrelevant influences, premise (4) is true.

[11] See Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, chs. 1-4. Philip Kitcher develops a similar account in *The Ethical Project*, part I.

However, a caveat of sorts is in order. As Joyce himself is happy to admit,[12] there is a certain sort of ethical naturalist who can grant that Joyce's or some relevantly similar explanation of our moral beliefs is correct yet deny that this explanation can help debunkers make their case. For, according to this very specific sort of naturalist, the evolutionary and other facts that explain our beliefs are themselves *identical* to the moral facts those beliefs are about. If that's right, then not only does the debunkers' preferred explanation of our moral beliefs entail their truth, it also gives us no reason to doubt our moral beliefs are e-connected. Strictly speaking, then, this argument poses a challenge, not to realists in general, but to all realists *except* for this one, very specific type of naturalist. As it happens, however, most philosophers who have written about debunking arguments have found this particular form of naturalism implausible (myself included).[13]

1.2. Refining the Challenge

Such, then, are the essentials of what is in my view the most compelling evolutionary debunking argument. My aim in this section is to develop the argument a bit further so as to bring out exactly where the real action is. I'll begin in §1.3.1 by articulating, very briefly, the response I will develop in the remaining chapters. Then, in §§1.3.2-4, I articulate what I think are the three best rejoinders available to debunkers.

1.2.1. A Preliminary Response to Debunkers

Premise (4) of the debunking argument holds that the best complete explanation of why we make the ethical judgments we do neither presupposes nor entails their truth. Yet, as some readers may have already noticed, there is an alternative explanation for why at least some people hold the ethical

[12] Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, ch. 6.
[13] Though see Copp, "Darwinian Skepticism about Moral Realism" and Lott, "Must Realists Be Skeptics? An Aristotelian Reply to a Darwinian Dilemma."

beliefs they do that, one might think, is at least *sometimes* better than that defended by debunkers. According to this alternative explanation, we form the beliefs we do, not simply because they follow from whatever beliefs we started with or because of the influences on our thinking of natural selection, our upbringing, or whatever other irrelevant influences, but because, having reflected on the relevant issues, we have come to realize that these rather than any other beliefs we could form are *true*. Moreover, unlike the debunkers' favored explanation, this explanation is manifestly *not* neutral with respect to the truth of our beliefs.

Obviously this explanation is off the table for false beliefs and for true beliefs whose truth is a matter of luck. But for those whose beliefs are true and the truth of whose beliefs is a result, not of some happy accident but of hard reflective work, this alternative is not just available and complete but arguably much better than the debunkers' explanations. For whereas the debunkers' explanations paint us as hapless victims of our biology or our backgrounds, stuck with whatever beliefs the influences to which we find ourselves subject incline us to form and with no ability to take charge of our own epistemic lives, this alternative explanation acknowledges rather than denies our potential for exercising meaningful epistemic agency. Indeed, compared to this alternative, it would be understandable were people who pride themselves on seeking out and taking into account challenges to their views to take offense at the debunkers' favored explanations. After all, debunkers would deny such people what they take to be a central aspect of their epistemic character. Sure, they might say, some explanation along the lines of that favored by debunkers is appropriate for some other people, or even for some of their own beliefs, but when this is so, that is a mark of a regrettable shortcoming, not an ineluctable fact of epistemic life.[14]

[14] This kind of response has received surprisingly little attention in the literature. Street briefly discuss**es** this response at "Darwinian Dilemma," §5, where she argues it's hopeless (more about that below in §1.2.3). So far as I have been able to tell, the only proponent of something close to this response is William Fitzpatrick; see "Why There is No Darwinian Dilemma for Ethical Realism" and "Debunking Evolutionary Debunking of Ethical Realism." For a similar response, see Mogensen, "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments and the Proximate/Ultimate Distinction" and "Do Evolutionary

Now, debunkers will not be at all satisfied with this response. Why not? In the remainder of this section, I'll explain three different objections they might raise. I'll take my time with these rejoinders, since it is the task of the remaining three chapters to respond to them.

1.2.2. Rejoinder 1: Taking Issue with the Proffered Explanation

The first rejoinder debunkers might plump for is inspired by the work of Gilbert Harman, who famously invites us to consider a case in which you see a group of children pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it and immediately judge their action wrong. Harman suggests that moral facts are "completely irrelevant" to the explanation of your making this judgment;[15] rather, Harman says, if we want to explain why you judge their action wrong, "[a]ll we need assume is that you have certain more or less well articulated moral principles that are reflected in the judgments you make, based on your moral sensibility."[16] The point, in effect, is that the explanation of the content of our ethical beliefs I have suggested for realists is inferior to that suggested by Harman because the former is redundant. Of course, Harman could allow, reflection does have a role to play in explaining why we form the judgments we do; it's just that we can make room for reflection to play that role without presupposing the truth of the judgments whose formation we mean to explain.

One response would note that Harman's argument threatens to prove too much. For as Brad Majors notes,

> The properties of non-basic sciences such as geology, biology, and psychology are put into as much jeopardy, if the argument is sound, as are moral properties. Take any *explanandum* that might appear to admit of a psychological explanation, say Darcy's reaching for a glass of wine. One might seek to explain this action by making reference to Darcy's desire for wine, together with his belief that the glass before him contains wine. This is as paradigmatic an example of common-sense psychological explanation as one could hope to find. Yet notice that it seems possible to explain the behavior without making reference to psychological

---

Debunking Arguments Rest on a Mistake about Evolutionary Explanations?" For a discussion of the differences between the two, see Fitzpatrick, "Misidentifying the Evolutionary Debunkers' Error: Reply to Mogensen."

[15] Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, p. 7.

[16] Ibid.

> properties or states. For example, there will without question be a neurophysiological explanation for why Darcy's hand moved as it did. Similar points could be made for explanations in any of the other non-basic sciences.[17]

If Harman wants to claim that the redundancy of the relevant alternatives suffices to establish the superiority of an explanation, he would seem committed to saying that these lower-level explanations are always better than their higher-level counterparts. But in that case, he appears committed to embracing the absurd conclusion that the properties studied by the non-basic sciences never play any explanatory role.[18]

Whatever this objection's merits, I want to focus on a different problem with Harman's argument. As Nicholas Sturgeon noticed in the mid-1980s, there is room for doubt as to the completeness of the explanation Harman favors.[19] "For it is natural," Sturgeon notes, "to think that if a particular assumption is completely irrelevant to the explanation of a certain fact, then the fact would have obtained, and we could have explained it just as well, even if the assumption had been false."[20] (This is known as the counterfactual test for explanatory relevance.) If that's right, then if we want to know whether or not the truth of our beliefs is relevant to or part of the explanation of our having them, we need to ask whether we would have the beliefs we do even if they were false—we need to ask, for example, whether or not we would believe the children who set the cat on fire acted wrongly even if they hadn't.

Harman of course thinks the question is straightforward. As Sturgeon observed, however, it is anything but:

> To answer the question, I take it, we must consider a situation in which what the children are doing is not wrong, but which is otherwise as much like the actual situation as possible, and then decide what your reaction would be in that situation. But since what makes their action wrong, what its wrongness *consists* in, is presumably something like its being an act of

[17] Majors, "Moral Explanation," pp. 4-5.
[18] For further discussion, see Majors, "Moral Explanation," §2.
[19] See Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations." For subsequent discussion, see Harman, "Moral Explanations of Natural Facts"; Sturgeon, "Harman on Moral Explanations of Natural Facts"; Blackburn, "Just Causes"; Sturgeon, "Contents and Causes"; and Blackburn, "Reply to Sturgeon." For a helpful overview of this literature, see Majors, "Moral Explanation."
[20] Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations," p. 245.

> gratuitous cruelty (or, perhaps we should add, of intense cruelty, and to a helpless victim), to imagine them not doing something wrong we are going to have to imagine their action different in this respect. More cautiously and more generally, if what they are actually doing is wrong, and if moral properties are, as many writers have held, supervenient on natural ones, then in order to imagine them not doing something wrong we are going to have to suppose their action different from the actual one in some of its natural features as well. So our question becomes: Even if the children had been doing something else, something just different enough not to be wrong, would you have taken them even so to be doing something wrong?[21]

With the question so understood, Sturgeon goes on to say, it doesn't necessarily follow that Harman's answer is wrong. What does follow, however, is that in order to construct a case in which Harman's answer is right, we have to imagine an individual with a pretty strange psychological profile:

> For suppose you are like this. You hate children. What you especially hate, moreover, is the sight of children enjoying themselves; so much so that whenever you see children having fun, you immediately assume they are up to no good. The more they seem to be enjoying themselves, furthermore, the readier you are to fasten on any pretext for thinking them engaged in real wickedness. Then it is true that even if the children had been engaged in some robust but innocent fun, you would have thought they were doing something wrong; and Harman is perhaps right about you that the actual wrongness of the action you see is irrelevant to your thinking it wrong. This is because your reaction is due to a feature of the action that coincides only very accidentally with the ones that make it wrong. But, of course, and fortunately, many people aren't like this (nor does Harman argue that they are). It isn't true of them that, in general, if the children had been doing something similar, although different enough not to be wrong, they would still have thought the children were doing something wrong. And it isn't true, either, therefore, that the wrongness of the action is irrelevant to the explanation of why they think it wrong.[22]

The important point here is that, as with all counterfactuals, the way to assess those relevant here is to look at the closest possible world in which the antecedent is true and ask whether the consequent is as well. And as Sturgeon points out, when we do this, it's far from obvious that things are going to work out in Harman's or, more relevantly for our purposes, the debunkers' favor.

Here debunkers are liable to protest that this response misunderstands their and Harman's good point. The point, they will say, is not that we would believe the children in the example were

[21] Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations," pp. 246-247.
[22] Ibid., pp. 247-248.

doing something wrong even if they had done something else that, though in some ways similar, is not wrong. The point was instead that we would believe it was wrong of them to light a cat on fire even if *that very thing*—i.e., lighting a cat on fire for fun—were not wrong. In other words, Harman and the debunkers mean to say that if we vary the moral facts but hold the non-moral facts constant, we will form all the same beliefs.[23]

One response much discussed in the literature is to note that so understood, the relevant counterfactuals come out false on a standard semantics, at least given that moral facts supervene on non-moral facts.[24] To say that moral facts supervene on non-moral facts is just to say that, for every moral fact M, there is some set of non-moral facts $N_1 \ldots N_n$ such that, necessarily, if $N_1 \ldots N_n$ obtains, then M does as well. If, then, we are to understand Harman as claiming that, if the moral facts were different but all the non-moral facts on which they supervene just as they are, we would still take all the same moral facts to obtain, the counterfactual on which his argument depends has a necessarily false antecedent. On a standard semantics, however, a counterfactual $A \rightarrow B$ is true so long as all the nearest possible A-worlds are B-worlds. Since there are no possible A-worlds if A is necessarily false, there are in that case no A-worlds that fail to be B-worlds, and Harman's counterfactual comes out false.

Still, this is hardly the end of the matter. Debunkers might deny the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral or—more plausibly—dispute the standard semantics for counterfactuals (which, after all, is controversial, and for good reason).[25] Rather than discuss these possibilities, however, I want to flag a deeper difficulty with this first rejoinder, one that doesn't depend on any contentious claims about the semantics of counterfactuals. By emphasizing the necessity of the

[23] Sturgeon takes up this same objection at "Moral Explanations," pp. 248ff., though he answers it differently than I do.
[24] For discussion of this response, see*, inter alia*, Korman and Locke, "Against Minimalist Responses," §6 and Justin Clarke-Doane, "Debunking and Dispensability," §2.2 and "Justification and Explanation in Mathematics and Morality," §4.
[25] For reasons to think the standard semantics for counterfactuals is problematic, see Nolan, "Impossible Worlds," §2.2. For discussion of these two responses, see again Clarke-Doane, "Debunking and Dispensability," §2.

supervenience relation, this objection to Harman's argument helps to bring out just how hard it is to make out the scenario Harman means to invite us to envision—what, for example, a world in which it is not wrong to set cats on fire for fun is supposed to be like. But I worry that even this line of thought concedes too much to Harman and debunkers. For in my view, it is not just difficult but *impossible* to envision any such scenario, for I doubt that we can even so much as make *sense* of Harman and the debunkers' suggestion here. At this early juncture, I expect this suggestion may strike readers as over-the-top. But since it is the burden of chapter 2 to make good on this and related claims, I won't press the point now. For now, the important thing to note is just that, if I am right, proponents of this Harman-inspired defense of debunking arguments cannot evade Sturgeon's good point in the way Harman tries to.

Before moving on to the second objection debunkers might press against the response to their arguments canvassed in §1.2.1, I want to note a potential concern about the Sturgeon-style response to debunkers I've just been exploring. It might be thought that debunkers have another way out here. In particular, they might note that passage of the counterfactual test is not always sufficient to demonstrate causal or explanatory relevance. Consider, for instance, the length of a pole's shadow. If the pole were a different length, or if the sun were at a different angle, the shadow would be a different length, yet the dimensions of the pole and position of the sun do not jointly *cause* the shadow to be as long as it is. Rather, the shadow's length supervenes on the length of the pole together with the position of the sun. Similarly in cases where two things have a common cause. Suppose I fire a pistol at a watermelon and it blows up. If there hadn't been a bang, the watermelon would not have exploded, but the bang doesn't cause the watermelon to explode or explain why it does; rather, the bang and the explosion of the watermelon are both caused by the burning of the powder, which forces the bullet from the barrel.[26] In light of these kinds of cases,

[26] For discussion, see Majors, "Moral Explanation," §4, from which I take the first of these examples.

debunkers might reasonably ask what reason we have to think the counterfactual test can help us to establish causal-explanatory relevance in the present case.

I doubt this is a problem for Sturgeon-style responses to debunkers, however. Plainly, our moral beliefs do not supervene on the moral facts, so the concern about the pole-shadow case is not applicable here. As we will see later in chapter 3 when I briefly discuss so-called third-factor responses, by contrast, several philosophers have argued that the moral facts and our moral beliefs have a common cause,[27] so this possibility is not so easily ruled out. Nevertheless, this possibility can be of no help to debunkers. For suppose it obtains. In that case, sure, the counterfactual test is inappropriate, and a Sturgeon-style response cannot show that debunkers' premise (4) is mistaken. Unfortunately for debunkers, however, in that case our moral beliefs turn out to be e-connected to moral facts after all, contrary to premise (5). If, then, debunkers want to rescue their premise (4) from Sturgeon's attack, they had better find another way to do it.

1.2.3. Rejoinder 2: Underdetermination-based Skepticism

Another, very different kind of rejoinder depends on a more general skeptical challenge for realists, one according to which realism precludes ethical knowledge. This is how Sharon Street elaborates the argument in her "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value." In the relevant passage, Street is addressing a slightly different debunking argument, one I will discuss below in §1.3.2. There, the suggestion at issue is that realists might avoid the conclusion that we are probably unreliable in ethics by appealing to the potentially corrective influence of reflection on the content of our beliefs: "according to the objection," Street says, "just as a compass and a little steering can

[27] This sort of view has been advanced or defended in Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, pp. 342-348; Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*, pp. 218-219; Schafer, "Evolution and Normative Skepticism"; Enoch, "The Epistemological Challenge to Metanormative Realism," §§3-5 and *Taking Morality Seriously*, §7.4; Wielenberg, "On the Evolutionary Debunking of Morality," §§4-8, *Robust Ethics*, ch. 4, and "Ethics and Evolutionary Theory," §3; Brosnan, "Do the Evolutionary Origins of Our Moral Beliefs Undermine Moral Knowledge," pp. 60-63; and Skarsaune "Darwin and Moral Realism," §3, among others.

correct for the influence of the wind and tides on the course of one's boat, so rational reflection can correct for the influence of selective pressures on our values."[28] Still, it's not hard to see the relevance to the version of the argument we have been looking at; in our case, the relevant claim is that our capacity to acquire ethical knowledge through reflection is part of what explains why we have the beliefs we do. Either way, realists are in trouble if their view precludes the possibility that we might acquire ethical knowledge through reflection.

Street thinks it does. She notes that

> the objection gains its plausibility by suggesting that rational reflection provides some means of standing apart from our evaluative judgements, sorting through them, and gradually separating out the true ones from the false as if with the aid of some uncontaminated tool.[29]

But, she says, this cannot be right:

> For what rational reflection about evaluative matters involves, inescapably, is assessing some evaluative judgements in terms of others. Rational reflection must always proceed from some evaluative standpoint; it must work from some evaluative premises; it must treat some evaluative judgements as fixed, if only for the time being, as the assessment of other evaluative judgements is undertaken. In rational reflection, one does not stand completely apart from one's starting fund of evaluative judgements: rather, one uses them, reasons in terms of them, holds some of them up for examination in light of others.[30]

"Thus," she goes on,

> if the fund of evaluative judgements with which human reflection began was thoroughly contaminated with illegitimate influence…then the tools of rational reflection were equally contaminated, for the latter are always just a subset of the former. It follows that all our reflection over the ages has really just been a process of assessing evaluative judgements that are mostly off the mark in terms of others that are mostly off the mark. And reflection of this kind isn't going to get one any closer to evaluative truth, any more than sorting through contaminated materials with contaminated tools is going to get one closer to purity.[31]

It is a bit hard to say exactly what the argument here is supposed to be. Plausibly, though, Street's concern has to do with the under-determination of the truth of our beliefs by the evidence available to us in reflection. The thought seems to be that reflection can play the corrective role the realist

---

[28] See "Darwinian Dilemma," pp. 122-125. The quote comes from p. 123.
[29] Ibid., p. 123.
[30] Ibid., p. 124.
[31] Ibid.

needs it to only if it allows us to critically assess our beliefs and inclinations so as to rule out the possibility that we are deeply and pervasively mistaken about ethical reality—to borrow a phrase of John McDowell's, we need to be able examine our justificatory practices from "sideways on."[32] If, though, reflection is as she suggests, this is impossible, and the best rational support we can possibly have for particular ethical claims leaves that possibility open. For since ethical reflection is by its nature such as to preclude the possibility that we might critically examine the assumptions on which it relies, we have no way of knowing whether or not we are on the right track. Rather, for all we do or *can* know, reflection could be a wildly unreliable way of sorting true from false beliefs: like envatted brains trying to discern the truth about their surroundings, we might just be spinning our wheels.

So understood, Street's remarks suggest she has in mind something like the following argument:

1. UNDERDETERMINATION: If S knows that *p* and *q* describe incompatible scenarios, and S lacks a rational basis that favors *p* over *q*, then S lacks knowledge that *p*.[33]
2. The rational support I have for my moral beliefs does not favor those beliefs over radical skeptical hypotheses.
3. So I have no moral knowledge.

By way of elaboration, I'll make a couple of remarks about each of the argument's premises.

Premise (1). The argument's first premise, UNDERDETERMINATION, is a general epistemological claim that is hard to dispute, as the following two arguments show.

Consider first two incompatible scenarios, (1) and (2):

1. The sun will set in an hour
2. The sun will set in an hour and a quarter

UNDERDETERMINATION entails that

If I lack a rational basis that favors (1) over (2), I lack knowledge that (1).

[32] See *Mind and World*, pp. 34-36, 41-42.
[33] I take this formulation of UNDERDETERMINATION from Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, p. 30.

Now suppose I have more reason to believe (2) than to believe (1). Perhaps a quick look at the horizon suggested to me I had an hour left before sunrise, but the forecast for today indicates that I actually have an hour and a quarter. Do I know that (1)? Plainly not; if I did, I would be justified in believing that (1), but since I have more reason to believe that (2), I am plainly *not* justified in believing that (1). That is to say, since I lack a rational basis that favors (1) over (2), I lack knowledge that (1).

Turn now to a second argument. Consider the following radical skeptical hypothesis:

> MORAL INVERSION: although things seem otherwise to me as a result of evolutionary, cultural, psychological, and other irrelevant influences on my moral thinking, the moral facts are in fact the opposite of what I take them to be. So, for example, I regard cruelty as a vice, but in fact it is admirable.

Now suppose Street is right: the nature of ethical reflection is such that I lack a rational basis for holding the ethical beliefs I do over those whose truth MORAL INVERSION entails. In that case, any moral beliefs I go on to form are, in terms of the rational support I have for them, no better than a wild guess, and so, while they might turn out to be true, their truth would in that case be accidental. Since accidentally true belief is not knowledge,[34] it follows that moral knowledge is impossible. Here again, the fact that I lack a rational basis that favors one scenario over some other, incompatible one entails that I lack knowledge that the former obtains, just as UNDERDETERMINATION suggests.

Premise (2). The under-determination-based argument's second premise derives from the sorts of considerations Street puts forward in the passages above. However much support we might take ourselves to have for some ethical belief, the thought goes, our evidence will be compatible, not just with MORAL INVERSION, but in fact with any number of radical skeptical hypotheses. Given the nature of ethical reflection, there is just no way for us to acquire evidence that favors *any* ethical

[34] The classic defense of this claim is Gettier's "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" Though she doesn't use this language herself, some of Street's remarks suggest her concern is best cashed out in these terms. See, in particular, "Darwinian Dilemma," pp. 121-122, where she introduces her well-known Bermuda analogy, and cf. p. 124. See too her "Objectivity and Truth," §9, where she suggests that realists who take themselves to be reliable must regard their reliability as "sheer good fortune" (p. 315) and themselves as among the "normative elect" (p. 317).

beliefs over skeptical hypotheses, like MORAL INVERSION, that entail their falsity.

Before I move on to the final way debunkers might counter the response canvassed in §1.2.1 above, allow me to make a couple of more general observations about this argument.

First, note that this concern about the possibility of acquiring moral knowledge through reflection applies *only* to realists, since it is the independence of fact and belief that is supposed to entail the insufficiency of all available evidence. If the facts in ethics were dependent on our attitudes in the way anti-realists claim, it would at least be possible that the evidence for our beliefs we acquire through reflection would be inconsistent with their widespread falsity. Consider, for example, the anti-realist thesis RE:

> RE: the facts are whichever ones we would take to obtain were our ethical beliefs in reflective equilibrium.

Suppose RE is true, and suppose that I would believe that P were my beliefs in reflective equilibrium. If I manage to achieve reflective equilibrium, the evidence for P that I acquire in reflection would not leave it open that not-P. Similarly for other theses that make the facts in ethics dependent on our attitudes in other ways.[35]

Notice next that the more general skeptical challenge on which this version of the debunking argument depends has the same basic structure as under-determination-based skepticism about the external world.[36] According to this latter sort of skepticism, the evidence available to us concerning the external world is consistent with the possibility that we are massively deceived as to its character, whether because we are brains in vats, because we are being deceived by some powerful evil demon, or for some other reason; according to evolutionary skeptics who avail themselves of the arguments just sketched, the same is true regarding our evidence for ethical claims.

[35] Street in effect notes as much at "Darwinian Dilemma," §10.
[36] For a related point, see Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations," pp. 251-253.

1.2.3. Rejoinder 3: The Benacerraf-Field Challenge and the "Access" Problem

The third and final rejoinder debunkers might plump for appeals to a different general skeptical challenge, one that draws on the so-called "Benacerraf-Field challenge" to mathematical platonism. Hartry Field gives a good, rough characterization of the challenge in the following passage:

> if there are mathematical entities of the sort the platonist believes in (mind- and language-independent, having no spatio-temporal location, unable to enter into physical interactions with us or anything we observe) then there seems to be a difficulty in seeing how we could ever know that they exist, or know anything about them; the platonist needs to explain how such knowledge is possible, and no answer is evident except one that posits mysterious powers of access to the platonic realm.[37]

Field's remarks are liable to remind some readers of the epistemological component of Mackie's regrettably named "argument from queerness," contained in the second sentence of the following passage:

> If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else.[38]

If my experiences talking with other philosophers are at all representative, concerns of this sort are widespread. Even so, there is some controversy as to what exactly the problem is supposed to be.[39] In my view, the Benacerraf-Field Challenge is better understood as a pair of closely related but nevertheless distinct problems, one due to Paul Benacerraf and the other due to Harty Field.

We can start with the challenge due to Benacerraf. The story begins in 1967, when Alvin Goldman proposed the causal theory of knowledge:

> GOLDMAN'S CAUSAL THEORY: S knows that *p* if and only if the fact *p* is causally connected in an "appropriate" way with S's believing *p*.[40]

Goldman himself was pretty liberal about the kinds of causal connections he considered appropriate.

---

[37] Field, *Realism, Mathematics, and Modality*, p. 25.
[38] Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 38.
[39] For some of the difficulties, see Justin Clarke-Doane, "What is the Benacerraf Problem?" and Lutz, "The Reliability Challenge in Moral Epistemology."
[40] Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing," p. 369.

For example, he suggests at one point that "[r]emembering, like perceiving, must be regarded as a causal process"[41] and, a bit later, that "causal chains with admixtures of logical connections are causal chains."[42] He is also happy to allow that a relevant causal connection obtains if S's belief that *p* and the fact that *p* have a common cause.[43] Notably, Goldman is very clear in his initial formulation that he takes the theory to be applicable *only* to empirical knowledge. For knowledge of non-empirical truths, he says, "the traditional analysis is adequate."[44]

A few years later, in 1973, Paul Benacerraf—apparently thinking Goldman insufficiently ambitious—bit the bullet Goldman couldn't bring himself to bite, drawing on the causal theory to argue that, if platonism is true, mathematical knowledge appears to be impossible.[45] For in that case, he wondered, how might there be an appropriate causal connection between our mathematical beliefs and the corresponding mathematical facts?

In its initial formulation, Benacerraf's challenge invites a response from platonists Goldman no doubt anticipated. Where Benacerraf saw in the conflict between the causal theory and platonism a problem for the latter, platonists will draw the exact opposite conclusion, admitting the conflict but insisting, as Goldman in effect did himself, that it is not platonism but the causal theory that has to go. As David Lewis once put the point, "causal accounts of knowledge are all very well in their place, but if they are put forward as general theories, then mathematics refutes them."[46]

Still, one might wonder if this actually settles the crucial issue here. As an objection to formulations that appeal to the causal theory, which has long been rejected anyway, Lewis is probably right that this response is good enough. Yet there are compelling, general reasons to think that Benacerraf was onto something here. In fact, I will argue in chapter 3 below, there is good

---

[41] Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing," p. 360.
[42] Ibid., p. 368.
[43] Ibid., p. 364-365.
[44] Ibid., p. 357.
[45] Benacerraf, "Mathematical Truth."
[46] Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, p. 109.

reason to think the no-accident condition on knowledge is best understood, if not quite in causal, at least in explanatory terms.[47] The more compelling these reasons are, the less satisfying it will seem for platonists and other kinds of realists about *a priori* discourses to dismiss Benacerraf-style challenges by noting that they make mathematical knowledge impossible. At some point, it would seem, they need to explain how our beliefs about the relevant domain can satisfy the relevant condition on knowledge. Call this *Benacerraf's Challenge*.

* * *

This brings us to the second challenge, this one coming out of Hartry Field's 1983 attempt to re-frame Benacerraf's challenge so that it would not depend on the by-then widely-rejected causal theory. Here is Field:

> Benacerraf's challenge—or at least, the challenge which his paper suggests to me—is to provide an account of the mechanisms that explain how our beliefs about these remote entities can so well reflect the facts about them. The idea is that *if it appears in principle impossible to explain this*, then that tends to *undermine* the belief in mathematical entities, *despite* whatever reason we might have for believing in them.[48]

Together with Field's other remarks, this passage suggests the following argument:

1. We are generally reliable about mathematics.
2. The correlation mentioned in (1) is striking and demands explanation.
3. It appears to be impossible in principle for platonists to explain (1)
4. If a theory entails that some striking correlation is inexplicable, we ought to reject that theory.
5. So unless platonists can come up with some way to explain (1), we ought to reject platonism.

One might wonder here at premise (3). In particular, one might wonder why platonists cannot explain our reliability about mathematics in a way that echoes the explanation of why we form the ethical beliefs we do I canvassed in §1.2.1 above. Thus, they might say, I am reliable in mathematics because I work hard to make sure that I am. When I am inclined to form some

[47] Others who have argued for a position like this include Masahiro Yamada, Kieran Setiya, and David Faraci. See Yamada, "Getting It Right by Accident"; Setiya, *Knowing Right from Wrong*, ch. 3, and David Faraci, "Groundwork for an Explanationist Account of Epistemic Coincidence." For similar readings of Benacerraf's challenge, see Lutz, "The Reliability Challenge in Moral Epistemology," §4; Faraci, "Groundwork," §8.3; and Crow, "Causal Impotence and Evolutionary Influence," §2.1.

[48] Field, *Realism, Mathematics, and Modality*, pp. 25-30, 230-239. The quoted passage is from p. 26.

mathematical belief, I ask myself whether these inclinations are in some way suspect—whether, for instance, I might have made a mistake in calculating. So I check my work and seek others' input, thinking carefully about how to respond to challenges other people raise to my beliefs. I try to remain open-minded and scold myself when I fail to. If I notice that two or more of my beliefs are inconsistent, I think hard about how best to reconcile them. And so on. Why is this kind of explanation of reliability supposed to be off the table?

However, its considerable appeal notwithstanding, this response misses the good point Field is making when he says that, given the way platonists conceive of mathematical entities, he is "not optimistic" about their ability to provide the relevant explanation.[49] For as the passage above indicates, the kind of explanation of reliability Field is after is of a different sort entirely. *That* sort of explanation would do something the explanation just mentioned does not, namely "provide an account of the mechanisms that explain how our beliefs about these remote entities can so well reflect the facts about them."[50] Joshua Schechter puts the thought well in the following passage:

> We have some understanding of how perception can yield veridical beliefs about the external world. We possess a sketch of how the mechanisms underlying perception work and understand how they may yield true beliefs. But this explanation doesn't extend to the cases of logic, mathematics, modality, and other a priori domains. Nor is there available any well-developed alternative account. We simply do not understand how we can be reliable about these domains, given that our beliefs were not arrived at via some kind of perception.[51]

Presumably, Field's thought was that, until they can provide an account of this sort, the kind of explanation outlined in the previous paragraph can do them no good, since it leaves mysterious the crucial thing, namely how it is even so much as possible for us to know platonistically construed mathematical facts. *Field's Challenge* is simply to give an account of this sort.

* * *

[49] Field, *Realism, Mathematics, and Modality*, p. 27.
[50] Ibid., p. 26.
[51] Schechter, "The Reliability Challenge and the Epistemology of Logic," p. 438, quoted at Dreier, "Quasi-Realism and the Problem of Unexplained Coincidence," p. 271.

Benacerraf's Challenge and *Field's Challenge* are closely related, since a response to the former will sometimes suggest or involve a response to the latter and vice versa. Nevertheless they are not identical, and so I think we do well to distinguish them from one another. Each is a formidable challenge to realists about any *a priori* domain and, in particular, to would be anti-debunkers who wish to appeal, as I do, to our capacity to acquire moral knowledge through reflection to explain why we form the moral beliefs we do. Even so, I will argue in chapter 3, both are answerable, at least by the right kind of moral realist.

1.3. Two More Debunking Arguments

This completes my overview of the debunking argument I mean to take up together with the three ways of developing it in response to the objection I mean to press. However, this is not the only debunking argument that has been discussed in the literature. Some readers will accordingly wonder why I have singled this one out. In this short section, I briefly lay out each of the other two debunking arguments that have received significant attention in the literature, explaining in each case why I doubt meeting the debunking challenge requires any extensive engagement on my part with these other arguments.

1.3.1. Debunking Argument 2: Explaining Reliability

Some philosophers have understood debunkers to be making basically the same argument I just attributed to Field. David Enoch, for instance, writes that "Street's Darwinian Dilemma can be seen as a particular instance of the most general epistemological challenge to Robust Realism, properly understood."[52] As he understands it, that more general challenge is the following:

[52] Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, p. 164.

> very often, when we accept a normative judgment *j*, it is indeed true that *j*; and very often when we do not accept a normative judgment *j* (or at least when we reject it), it is indeed false that *j*. So there is a correlation between (what the realist takes to be) normative truths and our normative judgments. What explains this correlation? On a robustly realist view of normativity, it can't be that our normative judgments are causally or constitutively responsible for the normative truths, because the normative truths are supposed to be independent of our normative judgments. And given that (at least basic) normative truths are causally inert, they are not causally responsible for our normative beliefs. Nor does there seem to be some third-factor explanation available to the robust realist. And so the robust realist is committed to an unexplained striking correlation, and this may just be too much to believe.[53]

Other philosophers who have embraced this interpretation of the debunking challenge include Kieran Setiya, Jamie Dreier, and Joshua Schechter.[54]

I have already granted that this is a formidable challenge for realists. However, it is not plausible as an interpretation of the challenge posed by debunkers for the simple reason that it is not a genealogical debunking argument. After all, it does not depend on any claim about the influences on or explanation of our beliefs, evolutionary or otherwise. In my view, this argument is much better suited for the role I have laid out for it, as a way of blocking the kind of response to debunkers that I outlined in §1.2.1 above. Moreover, even those philosophers who disagree with me about this should be willing to grant that, in this context, it makes no practical difference. For since I mean to respond to this argument in any case, it is irrelevant whether or not we call it a debunking argument: either way, there is no need for me to engage with it separately.

1.3.2. Debunking Argument 3: Irrelevant Influences

This bring us to the interpretation of the debunking challenge that I believe best captures Sharon Street's thought in her "Darwinian Dilemma" paper. On this interpretation, the central claim is, not

---

[53] Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, p. 159. Cf. Enoch, "The Epistemological Challenge to Metanormative Realism: How Best to Understand It, and How to Cope with It."

[54] See Setiya, *Knowing Right from Wrong*, ch. 2; Dreier, "Quasi-realism and the Problem of Unexplained Coincidence"; and Schechter, "Explanatory Challenges in Metaethics." As Setiya notes, this interpretation is suggested by Street's "Objectivity and Truth? You'd Better Rethink It."

that we can explain why we hold the beliefs we do without presupposing their truth, but that we have good reason to believe that the character of our moral thinking has been shaped to a significant extent by natural selection and other irrelevant influences, such that, had those influences been significantly different, the content of our beliefs would be as well. In light of that fact, the argument then goes, we should conclude that, more likely than not, most of our ethical beliefs are false, at least if the facts in ethics are independent of our attitudes. Katia Vavova helpfully reconstructs the argument as follows:

1. *Realism*. Moral truths are attitude-independent.
2. *Influence*. Evolutionary forces have influenced our moral beliefs.
3. *Off-track*. Evolutionary forces aim at fitness, not attitude-independent moral truths.
4. *Gap*. The fitness enhancing beliefs and the moral truths come apart.
5. *Mistaken*. We have good reason to think that our moral beliefs are mistaken. (2-4)
6. *Principle*. If you have good reason to think that your belief is mistaken, and no other, better reason to think that it is not mistaken, then you cannot rationally maintain it.
7. *No better*. We have no better reason to think that our moral beliefs are not mistaken.
8. *Skepticism*. We cannot rationally maintain our confidence in our moral beliefs.[55] (5-7)

Though it can easily seem plausible, this argument has a fatal flaw. Vavova explains the point in the following passage:

> The debunker…aims to provide evidence of error. Evolution influenced our moral beliefs, she argues, and evolution selects for survival. But moral truths could be about something else. This much is plausible: the moral beliefs and the adaptive beliefs come apart. But its plausibility is grounded in our substantive moral beliefs. It is because we think that morality is about more than reproductive success that we worry about being inclined toward valuing reproductive success. If we cannot make any substantive assumptions about particular moral norms, then morality could (conceptually) be about anything. But if morality could be about anything, then we have no idea what morality is about. So we have no idea if evolutionary forces would have pushed us toward or away from the truth. So we have no reason to think we are mistaken.[56]

In other words, this kind of debunker faces a dilemma of her own. On the one hand, she might deny that we have any substantive moral knowledge. In that case, it is unclear why we should accept premise (4). On the other hand, the debunker might grant that we have enough substantive moral

[55] Adapted from Vavova, "Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism," pp. 108, 110. Cf. Bedke, "No Coincidence?"
[56] Ibid., p. 112. Cf. Vavova, "Debunking Evolutionary Debunking," §6.

knowledge to confirm that premise (4) is true. In that case, however, it would seem that the realist might leverage that knowledge to sort irrelevant or distorting from salutary influences on the content of his beliefs so as to ensure that he is not in fact badly mistaken about moral reality; having done that, the realist would seem to have very good reason to deny that he is mistaken, evolutionary influences on the content of his beliefs notwithstanding. In short, proponents of this argument can justify premise (4) only by making a concession that puts realists in a position to deny premise (7). In light of this problem with the argument, I see no need to discuss it further.

1.4. Generalizing the Challenge

I indicated in the introduction that debunking arguments need not draw on facts about the evolutionary history of our tendency to make ethical judgments or the evolutionary influences on the content of our beliefs. Instead they might focus on other irrelevant influences, such as historical or cultural context, upbringing, and political propaganda.[57] But up to this point, I have mostly spoken as though it were only ethical beliefs such arguments might purport to debunk. This is in fact not true. Rather, debunking arguments that target ethical beliefs constitute just one species in a much broader genus of arguments.

For instance, Street herself has made a debunking argument that targets our epistemic beliefs,[58] and Justin Clarke-Doane has done so with mathematical beliefs.[59] Nor is it hard to imagine other versions; for instance, challenges might focus on the influence of natural selection on our

[57] Jason Stanley has recently argued that, so long as socio-economic inequality persists, those with a greater share of society's resources will develop and propagate ideologies that validate their social status. See Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*. Though neither Stanley nor, to my knowledge, anyone else has developed the kind of argument I am talking about, it is not hard to see how they might. For since, according to Stanley, this will happen regardless of whether or not that status is deserved, the influence of the wealthy via propaganda would be irrelevant to the truth of the beliefs their propaganda encourages.
[58] Street, "Evolution and the Normativity of Epistemic Reasons."
[59] See Clarke-Doane, "Morality and Mathematics: The Evolutionary Challenge."

logical, philosophical, or modal beliefs.[60] More generally still, I see no reason to think such arguments could not be made regarding *any* of our beliefs.

Regardless of which kinds of beliefs and which kinds of influence are at issue, it will be possible to make debunking arguments like the one outlined in §1.1 above. For instance, one might suggest that since we can explain the content of our aesthetic beliefs without presupposing their truth, none of those beliefs are justified. Or again, one might suggest that, to explain our philosophical beliefs, we need only draw on the irrelevant influence of our historico-cultural context, rendering all our philosophical beliefs unjustified. In any case, reflection-centered responses analogous to that outlined in §1.2.1 will be possible, and rejoinders like those I discussed in §§1.2.2-1.2.4 will be available to debunkers.

For the most part I will not discuss these other arguments in what follows; however, this is not to say that nothing I say here has any wider application. In fact I suspect that the response to debunkers I elaborate in the next two chapters is applicable outside of ethics. I feel particularly confident that Street's argument against the possibility of knowledge of objective epistemic facts is problematic in almost exactly the same ways as the arguments on which I focus, but I would also not be surprised were something like this strategy to suffice to dispense with at least some challenges to the possibility of knowledge of objective mathematical, logical, philosophical, and modal beliefs. Still, any thorough consideration of these other arguments is far outside the scope of my project.

1.5. Realism and Objectivity

The debunking argument I mean to take up specifically targets realists. Up until now I have spoken as though it were obvious what realism is; in fact, however, there are different kinds of realism, and as we will see, it matters a great deal for my purposes which we are talking about. This section aims,

[60] Robert Nozick develops a challenge of this last sort in *Invariances*, ch. 3.

first, to map out the conceptual terrain a bit and, second, to say a bit about the kind of realism I am concerned to defend.

1.5.1. Explanatory vs. Simple Realism

What is realism? I take it most self-described realists would agree the view is comprised of something like the following three claims:

1. COGNITIVISM: ethical claims express propositions.
2. SUCCESS: some of these propositions are true.
3. OBJECTIVITY: ethical propositions admit of objective truth and falsity.

Still, this basic characterization could be improved in a couple of ways. For instance, this characterization of COGNITIVISM is too simple, as is clear from Mark Kalderon's taxonomy of meta-ethical positions in *Moral Fictionalism*.[61] A more thorough discussion would distinguish this claim from another, closely-related claim, namely that acceptance of an ethical sentence constitutes belief in the corresponding proposition rather than, say, entertainment of a useful fiction. (Fictionalists say it doesn't, realists that it does.) For our purposes, though, the more important issue with this characterization is its relative vagueness about the realist's third claim, OBJECTIVITY. What exactly does it mean to say that ethical propositions admit of objective truth and falsity?

A common sort of answer appeals to the independence of ethical truths from people's beliefs or attitudes. The following proposal, adapted from a proposal discussed in a recent article by Elizabeth Tropman, is representative:

> The moral proposition MP admits of objective truth just in case MP's truth value is independent of any actual or hypothetical agent's (i) belief or non-cognitive attitude about *x*'s being *m* and (ii) non-cognitive attitude about *x*.[62]

Tropman states the proposal in terms of a particular kind of moral proposition, that some *x* has some moral property *m*, but it is meant to be perfectly general, applying in addition to claims

[61] See *Moral Fictionalism*, ch. 3.
[62] See Tropman's discussion of (M7) at "Formulating Moral Objectivity," pp. 10f.

involving ethical or normative relations such as being worse than or being a reason for, as well as to various embedded moral claims, such as that if things were thus and so, it would be wrong to lie. I take it Tropman's reason for opting for this formulation rather than one that attempts to explicitly mention every other sort of moral proposition is just that a formulation of the latter sort would be unwieldy. I agree and will follow her in this, but readers should bear in mind that the theses under discussion are meant to apply to other sorts of propositions.

Whatever its appeal, this common understanding of the notion has unwelcome implications, for if this is how we understand the notion of objectivity, we will be forced to regard certain kinds of humdrum attitude-dependence as a threat to the objectivity of ethics. Consider, for example, these cases from Tropman:

> The fact that I would like my neighbor, Sara, to pick up my mail and care for my garden while I am away could make her doing these things morally permissible, and even under certain circumstances required. If her help would be unwelcome, then on any number of ethical frameworks her intervention would be the wrong thing to do, and wrong *because* it would not be welcomed.[63]

Here Tropman's attitude toward her neighbor's picking up her mail makes a moral difference, one that seems perfectly compatible with its being objectively permissible for Sara to do these things. Yet, because of its clause (i), the above account of moral objectivity forces us to say otherwise. If, then, we want to make room for the possibility of objective ethical truth in cases like this, we need to find a different way of spelling out what's involved in the notion of objectivity.

> I believe we should adopt the following proposal instead, again adapted from Tropman:
>
> the moral proposition MP that *x* is *m* admits of objective truth just in case just in case MP's truth does not depend *only* on any actual or hypothetical agent's (i) belief or non-cognitive attitude about *x*'s being *m* or (ii) non-cognitive attitude about *x*.[64]

This formulation allows that it might be objectively true that it is permissible for Sara to pick up Tropman's mail, since the permissibility of Sara's act doesn't depend *only* on Tropman's attitude

[63] Tropman, "Formulating Moral Objectivity," p. 11.
[64] See Tropman's discussion of (M9) at ibid., pp. 13ff.

toward it. In addition, it depends on the facts that, by doing so, Sara won't be breaking a promise someone is relying on, won't be harming anyone, and so on.

Yet although this second formulation is certainly an improvement on the first, it has problems of its own. In particular, it is ambiguous between a truth-conditional reading and an ontological reading. On the first, truth-conditional reading, it amounts to saying that

> TRUTH-CONDITIONAL OBJECTIVITY: The moral proposition MP that *x* is *m* admits of objective truth in the sense that its truth *does not depend only* on any actual or hypothetical agent's (i) belief or non-cognitive attitude about *x*'s being *m* or (ii) non-cognitive attitude about *x*.

On the second, ontological reading, by contrast, the claim is that

> ONTOLOGICAL OBJECTIVITY: The moral proposition MP that *x* is *m* admits of objective truth in the sense that *x's* having the property *m does not depend only* on any actual or hypothetical agent's (i) belief or non-cognitive attitude about *x*'s being *m* or (ii) non-cognitive attitude about *x*.[65]

So we can ask: which of these theses do realists typically have in mind, and if both, how do they understand the relationship between them?

My guess is that all self-described realists would endorse both theses and regard them as mutually entailing; at any rate, that is true of the two broad types of realist I will be concerned with here. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, this leaves considerable room for disagreement. In particular, realists who affirm both TRUTH-CONDITIONAL OBJECTIVITY and ONTOLOGICAL OBJECTIVITY and regard these theses as mutually entailing might disagree as to which plays the moral fundamental explanatory role. Proponents of what I will call *explanatory realism* take a metaphysics first approach, contending that their ontological objectivity explains the truth-conditional objectivity of ethical

[65] Cf. John Searle's distinction between the "epistemic" and "ontological" senses of objectivity at *The Construction of Social Reality*, pp. 7-9.

propositions, while proponents of *simple realism* instead take a discourse first approach, suggesting that their truth-conditional objectivity explains the ontological objectivity of ethical propositions.[66]

None of this, of course, is to meant to suggest that this is the *only* issue realists might disagree about if they affirm both TRUTH-CONDITIONAL OBJECTIVITY and ONTOLOGICAL OBJECTIVITY and regard these theses as mutually entailing. Among other things, realists of this sort might disagree about the character of ethical properties and relations—whether they are natural or non-natural, e.g. However I will have little to say about these other disagreements, since for my purposes, that between explanatory and simple realists is far more important. For while I suspect debunking arguments are decisive against explanatory realists, I mean to argue that simple realists can answer them.

1.5.2. A Brief Sketch of Simple Realism

Explanatory realism is, I take it, familiar enough, but many readers may be puzzled about how to understand what I'm calling simple realism. In this section, therefore, I'll say a bit about the character and consequences of simple realism, or at least the version of the view I favor.

Very generally, I think about participating in moral discourse and, with it, practical reasoning more generally, as incredibly complicated skills, akin in this respect to playing music or painting. Like sports and games, practical reasoning is a rule-governed activity, one where the point is not to win but to live well. We begin to learn these rules when we learn language, and some command of them is required for basic linguistic and conceptual competence. These linguistic -conceptual rules are constitutive of moral discourse and thought in the sense that they determine the meanings of our words and the extension of our concepts, just as the rules of chess determine what it is to be a rook or a pawn. And as with other complex skills, the learning process extends far beyond childhood.

[66] I borrow this distinction between different types of realism from Amie Thomasson. See her *Ontology Made Easy*, pp. 155-156.

Its comparison of moral education to the process of learning other complex skills and its emphasis on the need for moral judgment makes the view broadly neo-Aristotelian, while its suggestion that moral judgement is itself a skill has echoes in the Stoics; more recently, Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus and by Nigel Desouza have defended views in this vein.[67] The view also bears some similarity Terence Cuneo and Russ Shafer-Landau's "moral fixed points" view, according to which any moral system deserving of the name must include a variety of conceptual moral truths.[68] However it is even closer to Amie Thomasson's "normativist" view of modality, about which I say more later.[69]

I take it that the rules governing moral discourse fall into two broad categories, introduction rules and exit rules. Introduction rules say when a term or concept applies. Exit rules say which linguistic or conceptual moves—that is, which inferences—are appropriate given that some term or concept does apply. Because moral reasoning is part of practical reasoning more generally, exit rules link moral verdicts with actions, often in conjunction with claims about prudential or other concerns. An example of an introduction rule is that other things being equal, it is bad to break a promise. An example of an exit rule is that, other things being equal, you ought to babysit for your friend if they ask you, provided it would not be terribly inconvenient and that could do so without wronging anyone (for example, by making yourself unable to fill in for a colleague whose class you had already promised to teach that night).

Importantly, competence with the relevant terms and concepts does not require that one be able to explicitly *state* the rules that govern those terms and concepts. Speaking specifically of

---

[67] See Dreyfus and Dreyfus, "Towards a Phenomenology of Ethical Expertise" and Desouza, "Pre-Reflective Ethical Know-How." I have developed similar ideas in my "The Virtuous Person as Master" and "The Stoics on Learning to Be Good."

[68] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau, "New Directions for Moral Nonnaturalism: The Moral Fixed Points."

[69] See Thomasson, "Norms and Necessity" and "How Can We Come to Know Metaphysical Modal Truths."

introduction rules, which she calls "application conditions," Amie Thomasson helpfully explains the point as follows:

> rather than thinking of application conditions as definitions competent speakers (or anyone else) could recite, we should instead think of them as rules for when it is and is not proper to use a term, which speakers master in acquiring competence with applying and refusing a new term in various situations, and that (once mastered) enable competent speakers to evaluate whether or not the term would properly be applied in a range of actual and hypothetical situations. Although the application conditions for many basic nouns might not be statable at all, they will be learnable, as infants learn (through the approval and disapproval, the comprehension or bewilderment of their caregivers and eventually peers) that in circumstances *like these* it is appropriate to say 'this is a K' or 'there is a K', while in circumstances *like these* it is not. They thereby learn when the term is to be applied and when refused, and so master the application conditions for these semantically basic terms.[70]

This may remind readers of Aristotle's emphasis on the necessity of *phronesis* and of John McDowell's claim that ethics is not "codifiable."[71]

I regard moral theory as an attempt to work out the content of these rules. In principle, simple realists could defend solutions like those I develop in the following chapters regardless of which first-order moral theory they think best, so my project doesn't require that I commit myself on this score. However, I do have a preference, and in the interest of putting my cards on the table and of giving readers a better sense of how simple realism might be fleshed out, I'll say a bit about it.

I am inclined to think our best moral theory will be composed mostly if not wholly of what Mark Lance and Margaret Little call "defeasible generalizations."[72] These are claims like the following:

- Defeasibly, matches light when struck.
- Subject to provisos, an increase in supply leads to a drop in price.
- Ceteris paribus, sheep reproduce only with other sheep.
- Other things being equal, fish eggs develop into fish.
- In normal conditions, appearances are epistemically trustworthy.[73]

---

[70] Thomasson, *Ontology Made Easy*, p. 93.
[71] See, e.g., McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," p. 58.
[72] They have discussed claims of this sort at length in connection with debates about moral particularism in a series of papers. See their "Defeasibility and the Normative Grasp of Context," "Where the Laws Are," "Defending Moral Particularism," "Particularism and Antitheory," and "From Particularism to Defeasibility in Ethics" and Lance's "The Functions of Moral Practice: Why is Morality Governed by Defeasible Laws?"

Such claims, Lance and Little argue, are not well understood either as shorthand for claims that spell out all of the relevant defeating conditions or as statistical generalizations. Rather, they are best understood as saying that the circumstances in which the predicate holds true of the subject are privileged, since such circumstances are especially revelatory of the subject's nature or of that of the domain of reality of which it is a part. They inform us, that is, about a *deep* connection that exists between the subject and the predicate.

Lance and Little explain the point in the following passage, focusing on the defeasible generalization that matches light when struck:

> Very roughly put, to understand the defeasible connection between striking and lighting that governs the concept match...is to know what conditions are privileged, to understand the various ways in which conditions can vary from the privileged ones, and to understand the differences those deviations make. It is to understand, for instance, that matches don't light when wet, unless again they are in the presence of a particularly heavy concentration of oxygen, but even then not if the temperature is near to absolute zero, and on and on. One will not be able to spell out exhaustively what privileged conditions consist in, nor the set of possible departures. But someone with a broad understanding of matches will have a good practical understanding of privileged conditions and deviations in the relevant domain—as evidenced by the fact that they generally succeed in their attempts to light matches, don't waste their matches by making attempts when there is no hope of success, etc.[74]

To understand a defeasible generalization—to have, as Lance and Little say, a grasp of the modal geography near to the privileged world(s)[75]—is thus not just to know which worlds are privileged and which are not, but to know what differences those differences make—to know, for instance, that in worlds in which predators eat the fish eggs before they hatch, fish eggs *don't* develop into fish.

---

[73] These are Lance and Little's examples. See "Where the Laws Are," p. 151.
[74] "From Particularism to Defeasibility in Ethics," pp. 62-63.
[75] Ibid., pp. 62-63.

In my view, the introduction and exit rules that govern the game of giving and asking for ethical reasons take the form of defeasible generalizations. I take it all of the following are plausible candidates:

- Ceteris paribus, lying is wrong.
- Other things being equal, the fact that some activity would cause someone pain is a reason not to engage in it.
- Defeasibly, it would be wrong not to help someone in need if one could easily do so.
- Generally speaking, it is wrong to keep more than enough of some essential resource for oneself if others are struggling to meet their basic needs.
- Typically, one ought to comply with others' expressed wishes.

As with the non-ethical generalizations discussed above, these ethical defeasible generalizations say how things stand, ethically speaking, in privileged conditions. In non-privileged conditions, things may be different, and full understanding of each of these generalizations requires knowing exactly how. For instance, understanding the first involves knowing that it is not wrong to lie to the slave patrol when they ask if you're harboring a runaway or to ICE agents asking after the whereabouts of a refugee so that they can return them to be tortured at home.[76]

* * *

One worry readers may have about this version of simple realism concerns its claims about the structure of moral theory. In particular, some will worry, a moral theory composed of defeasible generalizations leaves us with an unconnected heap of duties.[77] Yet Lance and Little argue convincingly that, far from forming an unconnected heap, a moral theory composed of defeasible generalizations might be richly interconnected, its tenets mutually supporting and illuminating one another. The point is best brought out with examples, so consider the claims that (defeasibly) the fact that it would cause another physical pain is a wrong-making feature of an act and that (defeasibly) one ought to comply with others' expressed wishes. The precise ways in which these

[76] Lance uses the latter example in "The Functions of Moral Practice."
[77] A phrase I take from David McNaughton. See his "An Unconnected Heap of Duties?"

facts relate to another change across contexts, but at least most of the time, the latter has a sort of explanatory priority over the former. Note, for instance, that the *reason* it is permissible for a medical professional to cause someone pain by, say, giving someone a shot they need is often or anyway may be that the patient has sought help and given the medical professional permission to do so: causing pain is here permissible precisely because complying with the patient's expressed wishes requires that pain be caused in this way. The same explanatory priority is present in radically different contexts, such as that of the sexual practices of BDSM, which Lance and Little have discussed in several of their articles.[78] Here the significance of both causing pain and complying with others' expressed wishes is often (though not necessarily) the exact opposite of what it normally is. In the BDSM room, one ought to flout others' expressed wishes in many cases, though, at least most of the time, and in the most common versions of the practice, not when pre-arranged safe words are uttered. Similarly, the fact that an act would cause another pain is often, not just *not* a reason to refrain from performing it, but in fact a positive reason *to* perform it. In both cases, this fact is to be explained with respect to prior agreements made in those privileged conditions in which one ought comply with another's expressed wishes: it is only because two people have agreed beforehand to take part in this practice that it can be permissible for them to flout one another's wishes and cause one another pain in the BDSM room. This is just one example; still, I hope that it gives some sense of the ways a moral theory composed of defeasible generalizations might yet recognize how deeply imbricated and intertwined are the rules governing moral reflection.

Another worry about simple realism—much more important for our purposes—is that, given that they think of ethical discourse as at root just a special kind of language-game, it is not clear how simple realists can admit talk of ethical relations, properties, and facts. In fact, they can do so in a way that is surprisingly straightforward, drawing on what Amie Thomasson's so-called "easy"

[78] See, *inter alia*,"Where the Laws Are," pp. 162-165.

approach to ontology.[79] Very generally speaking, Thomasson's view is that competent speakers may answer existence questions by observing that the application conditions for some term obtain and inferring, on that basis, that the object in question exists. Thus, confronted with the question whether there are tables or just atoms arranged table-wise, we may answer that, since there are atoms arranged table-wise, there are tables. Similarly, simple realists may easily answer questions about the existence of ethical relations, properties, and facts by drawing on their command of the rules mastery of which is necessary for competence with the relevant terms and concepts. Thus, given that the fact that it would hurt someone is generally a reason not to perform an act, we might infer that the fact that the relevant act would hurt someone stands in the reason relation to that act, and from there, that there are ethical relations. From the fact that lying is defeasibly wrong, we may infer that lying has the property of wrongness and, from there, that there are ethical properties. Finally, assuming a deflationary view of facts, simple realists may infer that, since lying is wrong, it is a fact that lying is wrong, and that there are accordingly ethical facts.[80] In this respect, the version of simple realism I'm endorsing takes its cue from Carnap (in, for example, "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology"), as does Thomasson's own approach.

Notably, ethical relations, properties, and facts, so understood, cannot do any meaningful explanatory work. Instead, as Thomasson explains with reference to modal properties,

> any such attempted explanation would just be a dormitive virtue explanation. If we become entitled to say, 'Barak [*sic*] Obama has the property of being necessarily human' on the basis of a trivial inference from the true claim 'Barak [*sic*] Obama is necessarily human', then we cannot appeal to the modal property to explain the truth of the original modal claim. Instead, reference to the modal property falls out of the hypostatization from the original truth. So, this could no more 'explain' than we can explain why the poppies make us sleepy by (using the hypostatized trivial inference and) saying 'poppies have the dormitive virtue'.[81]

[79] See Thomasson, *Ontology Made Easy*, esp. chs. 2-3.
[80] Cf. Thomasson, "How Can We Come to Know Metaphysical Modal Truths," pp. 12-13.
[81] Thomasson, ibid., p. 13, note 13.

Here we come to the central difference between explanatory and simple realists. The point of saying that the former take a metaphysics first approach is precisely that they accord ethical relations, properties, and facts robust explanatory roles: that it has the property we call "wrongness" *explains* why lying is wrong, that it is a fact that lying is wrong *explains* why "lying is wrong" is true, and so on. On the simple realist's discourse first approach, by contrast, it is rather the structure of our language and the contours of our concepts that explain why lying has this property and why it is a fact that lying is wrong.

This last point brings us to what is, for my purposes, the most significant consequence of simple realism: its implications for how we go about determining whether ethical propositions admit of objective truth. Typically, the question is thought to hang on the existence of mind-independent properties or relations. This is the explanatory realist's view. On the simple realist view, however, the question turns out to be a first-order ethical question, to be decided by ethical reflection. For consider what we need to determine if we want to know whether or not ethical propositions admit of objective truth on the truth-conditional reading simple realists take to be more fundamental. On that view, recall,

> TRUTH-CONDITIONAL OBJECTIVITY: The moral proposition MP that *x* is *m* admits of objective truth in the sense that its truth *does not depend only* on any actual or hypothetical agent's (i) belief or non-cognitive attitude about *x*'s being *m* or (ii) non-cognitive attitude about *x*.

It follows that, if we want to know whether or not moral propositions admit of objective truth, all we need to do is think about the circumstances under which they would be true—their truth-conditions. We might do so by asking whether or not their truth depends *only* on the relevant sorts of facts about people's beliefs and attitudes. Or, what comes to the same thing, we might inquire after the truth of the following counterfactual:

> for any actual or hypothetical agent, any belief or non-cognitive attitude about *x*'s being *m*, and any non-cognitive attitude about *x*, it might be false that *x* is *m* even if that agent had those beliefs or attitudes.

That is, we might ask whether or not there is any combination of actual or hypothetical agents, beliefs or non-cognitive attitudes about *x*'s being *m*, and non-cognitive attitudes about *x*, such that, necessarily, if that agent had those beliefs or attitudes, it would be true that *x* is *m*. In any case, the important thing is that the crucial question is an ethical rather than a metaphysical one.[82] To be sure, from the claim that the proposition that lying is wrong admits of objective truth, so established, we might infer that the property of wrongness is mind-independent, and from there that there are mind-independent ethical properties. But as with ethical properties more generally, wrongness' mind-independence cannot in this case do the explanatory work the explanatory realist wants it to do. In this sense, the simple realist agrees with Hilary Putnam that "the question is the objectivity of the discourse in question, and not the existence of some realm of non-natural objects."[83]

This concludes my brief sketch of at least one form of simple realism. Much more would need to be said in a fuller treatment, and I do say some of it in the following chapters. For now, though, and for my purposes, this is enough.

1.6. Conclusion

This completes my presentation of the debunking challenge. As we saw, many different arguments have been discussed in the literature on debunking arguments. One—Street's—is not particularly compelling, and another—Enoch's—is not really a debunking argument at all. The only debunking argument that really merits an extended response begins with an explanatory claim—that the best, complete explanation of why we form the moral beliefs we do neither presupposes nor entails their truth—and aims to show, on that basis, that none of our moral beliefs are justified, and that, for

[82] I thus partially agree with Ronald Dworkin's well-known claim that meta-ethical questions are all, ultimately first-order ethical questions. See "Objectivity and Truth," pp. 96-99, esp. p. 98.
[83] Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, p. 72. Putnam attributes this formulation to Georg Kreisel, as does Dummett in his essay, "Realism" (see p. 146); however, neither gives a reference, and I have not been able to find one.

every moral proposition P, we are rationally committed to withholding belief that P.

I suggested that this explanatory claim is mistaken: at least for some people, and at least for some of their beliefs, the best, complete explanation of why they hold them must appeal to their capacity to acquire moral knowledge through reflection, a capacity that enables them to sort the wheat from the evolutionary chaff so as to ensure that they see things aright. Debunkers, I said, might offer three rejoinders to this suggestion. First, they might suggest that this explanation is redundant. Second, they might appeal to under-determination-based skepticism. Finally, they might invoke a metaethical analogue of the Benacerraf-Field Challenge for mathematical platonism. This last, I suggested, is actually best understood as two distinct challenges, Benacerraf's Challenge and Field's Challenge, the former of which alleges that there is a causal or explanatory constraint on knowledge that our beliefs cannot satisfy if realism is true, and the latter of which challenges realists to explain the mechanism that allows us to so often get things right in ethics.

The aim of the following chapters is to defend the reflection-centered response to debunking arguments I sketched out in §1.2.1 above by responding to each of the three rejoinders I canvassed for debunkers. The next chapter responds to the first two, and my third chapter takes up Benacerraf's Challenge and Field's Challenge. Finally, in chapter four, I respond to some objections.

2

How to Begin at the Beginning

The aim of this chapter is to show that the first two of the three rejoinders I canvassed in the previous chapter—namely the Harman-inspired redundancy rejoinder and the underdetermination-based argument I attributed to Street—take for granted the same confused conception of the ways in which we can intelligibly take ourselves to be liable to go wrong in ethical reflection. Because it is a bit easier to see the mistake to which I want to draw attention in this context than in the context of the other, Harman-inspired rejoinder I discussed in §1.3.2, I will spend most of my time in this chapter on the underdetermination-based argument I attributed to Street, according to which realism precludes the acquisition via reflection of knowledge of ethical facts by rendering inadequate the evidence available to us in reflection. I will suggest that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, Street has given us no reason to think it inappropriate for realists to appeal to the potentially corrective influence of reflection on the content of our beliefs to explain why we hold the beliefs we do. Afterward, in §2.6.2, I will turn to the Harman-inspired defense of the debunking challenge, explaining how the same confusion I claim to find in Street's

argument pervades that other defense of debunking arguments as well.

2.1. Rule-Following Skepticism

Since my thought here is inspired by Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following, especially as interpreted by David Finkelstein, Jim Conant, Cora Diamond, and John McDowell,[1] I think the best way to explain what I have in mind is to make the parallel explicit. I therefore begin with a discussion of Wittgenstein. This section sets out the basic problem, and the next explains Wittgenstein's response.

2.1.1. Skepticism about Rules

At *Investigations* §431, Wittgenstein has an interlocutor articulate the basic thought behind skepticism about rule-following: "There is a gulf between an order and its execution. It has to be filled by the act of understanding." To bring out what's going on in this remark and in Wittgenstein's discussion of following rules more generally, I want to focus on a pair of questions: what kind of gulf might the rule-following skeptic have in mind here, and why might an "act of the understanding" be thought to enable us to bridge it?

One set of answers is suggested by the following example from David Finkelstein.[2] While an American who speaks little Italian is in Rome, a local police officer approaches her and shouts something. The American can tell by the officer's tone and body language that he wants her to do something, but she's not sure just what. Here there is a kind of gulf between the order and its and its execution: the American hears that order, but she has no idea what it would take to execute it. If *this* is the kind of gulf the skeptic has in mind, it is not hard to see why he might think an "act of the

[1] See Finkelstein's "Wittgenstein on Rules and Platonism"; Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism"; Diamond, "Realism and the Realistic Spirit"; and McDowell, "Meaning and Intentionality in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" and "Motivating Inferentialism: Comments on Chapter 2 of *Making It Explicit*."
[2] See his "Wittgenstein on Rules and Platonism," p. 61.

understanding" is required: for the tourist to figure out what the order means—for her to bridge the gulf between the order and its execution—she need only interpret the officer's words, perhaps with the aid of a dictionary or a bilingual passerby.

Importantly, however, this is not the kind of gulf that worries the rule-following skeptic. That gulf—a gulf that, both in order to distinguish it from that confronted by the American tourist and as a nod to Wittgenstein's own phrase "*Über-Ausdruck*,"[3] I will refer to as a "super-gulf"—is supposed to be more pervasive and, in a sense, deeper. *This* gulf, the skeptic would say, yawns even between the Roman policeman's *interpreted* order and its meaning. Indeed, according to the skeptic, we are *all* in the situation of the uncomprehending American tourist in Rome with respect to *all* orders, even the most familiar. Moreover, the skeptic holds, the interpretive process that helped the tourist cannot help us here.

The skeptic's worry is motivated by the thought that there is available to us an enormous variety of interpretations of any given word or sentence, between which it is not clear how we are supposed to choose. We see this thought reflected already in the despair to which the attempt by one of Wittgenstein's interlocutors to determine who or what is meant by the name "Moses" leads in *Philosophical Investigations* §87:

> 87. Suppose I give this explanation: "I take 'Moses' to mean the man, if there was such a man, who led the Israelites out of Egypt, whatever he was called then and whatever else he may or may not have done." — But doubts similar to those about the name "Moses" are possible about the words of this explanation (what are you calling "Egypt", whom the "Israelites", and so forth?). These questions would not even come to an end when we got down to words like "red", "dark", "sweet". — "But then how does an explanation help me to understand if, after all, it is not the final one? In that case the explanation is never completed; so I still don't understand what he means, and never shall!"[4]

More famously, though, and perhaps also more clearly, we see the source of the skeptic's worries in Wittgenstein's example of a teacher who attempts to teach a student to extend the series 0, n, 2n, 3n,

[3] See *Philosophical Investigations* §192.
[4] Translation modified.

… when given an order of the form "+n."[5]

Having done exercises with him up to 1,000, the teacher one day tells the student "+2"; the student expands the series just fine up to 1,000 but then writes 1,004, 1,008, 1,012. What has been thought so disturbing about this example is that fact that, while incorrect, the student's interpretation of the teacher's instructions could very well be perfectly consistent with them. Sure, the teacher will likely have said something to the effect that the student is to write the next number but one, but more likely than not he will not have specified that the student is to write "1,002" after "1,000." And even if he has, nothing about the way the teacher or anyone else has used the phrase "write 1,002" in the past *entails* that it does not in this case mean that the student is to write "1,004." Perhaps to grasp the meaning of that phrase just *is* to realize that, whereas in all previous cases complying with that order required writing "1,002" at this point, in *this* one doing so requires writing "1,004"; perhaps that just *is* what it would be to "go on in the same way." At any rate, the skeptic asks, how is the student to know otherwise?

The issue is further complicated by the appearance that nothing the teacher says by way of clarification could possibly rule out any misunderstanding on the part of the student. For just as any instructions the teacher gives are compatible with various ways of extending the series, so too anything the teacher might say to clarify his instructions will admit of an enormous variety of understandings. If, for example, the teacher were to explain that after 1,000, the student is to write "1,002, 1,004, and so on," the student might take it that he is to continue with "1,008, 1,016, 1,032…." Similarly for any interpretation of the teacher's words, which must itself be couched in words that admit of various interpretations. And so, here just as in the Moses case, an infinite regress can seem to threaten any attempt to arrive at clarity.

The question that exercises the interlocutors that feature in Wittgenstein's text, and the one

[5] See *Philosophical Investigations*, §185. For similar passages, see (*inter alia*) *Philosophical Investigations* §§79, 85-87, and 454 and *Zettel*, §238, some of which I discuss later in this chapter.

that has exercised many of his readers, is how, in spite of all this, the interlocutor might determine who is supposed to be designated by the name "Moses," or how the student might determine which way of going on in particular is supposed to be picked out by the teacher's order "+2"—how, in other words, either might bridge the super-gulfs that are here supposed to threaten understanding.[6]

It is precisely because interpretation suffices to bridge run-of-the-mill word-meaning gulfs like that confronted by the American tourist in Rome that the skeptic insists that, here as there, an act of the understanding of *some* sort is all that we need to bridge the super-gulf. He sees that an act of the understanding was perfectly sufficient in those other cases and so surmises that the same *must* be true here, even as he rejects the suggestion that interpretation might do the trick in this case. To cure this disease, the skeptic insists, we are going to need stronger medicine.

Naturally enough, many philosophers have reacted to these considerations by casting about for some *other* way to bridge the skeptic's super-gulf,[7] but for my purposes, these proposals matter less than Wittgenstein's own, very different response to the rule-following skeptic.

2.2. Wittgenstein's Response to the Rule-Following Skeptic

Wittgenstein does not make any attempt to explain how we might bridge the skeptic's supposed gulf; instead he asks—and invites his readers to ask—"what gulf?" Wittgenstein's thought is that the alleged super-gulf with which the rule-following skeptic is concerned is nothing more than a kind of mirage. That is to say: he thinks it is in fact a specious threat that we seem to confront only once we

[6] Though perhaps the best option, this way of putting the point has the unfortunate defect of making it sound as though rule-following skepticism is exclusively a form of what James Conant has called "Cartesian" skepticism, or (very roughly) skepticism about the possibility of a certain sort of knowledge (see Conant's "Two Varieties of Skepticism"). In fact, as the example of Kripke makes clear, as McDowell has in effect been saying for years (see both "Wittgenstein on Following a Rule" and "Meaning and Intentionality in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy"), and as Conant himself notes, Wittgenstein was concerned with both Cartesian and what Conant calls "Kantian" skepticism. Skepticism of this latter sort is (once again very roughly) skepticism about how a certain commonplace feature of our experience or thought is possible—how, in this case, words could possibly have meanings. Here I only discuss the Cartesian form of skepticism about rules, since that is more relevant for my purposes than is the Kantian alternative.

[7] Finkelstein's "Wittgenstein on Rule Following and Platonism" contains a penetrating criticism of one such attempt by Crispin Wright.

have lost ourselves in a kind of delusion, a misunderstanding not just of our own words, but also—and more importantly—of ourselves and our own real needs in philosophy that Cora Diamond has aptly called a "philosophical fantasy."[8] "Fantasy" in this usage contrasts with philosophical "realism" of a kind analogous to realism in literature and painting. In literature, realism is characterized by an accurate portrayal of the way the world works: a social movement succeeds, for example, not through the sudden and inexplicable acquiescence of those who stand in the way of progress but as a result of the hard work of organizing and education and only after what can sometimes seem too many setbacks to count. And in portraiture and landscape painting, realism is fidelity to the subject, an attempt to portray the person or the landscape as he or she or it really is. Similarly, philosophical realism in the sense relevant here involves fidelity to the ways we ordinarily speak and think, and getting caught up in philosophical fantasy in Diamond's sense involves losing sight of all this. The point of saying that the skeptic is caught up in fantasy, then, is that the skeptic's questions can only seem compelling—can only even seem to make sense—when, typically without meaning to do so or even realizing that we have, we divorce ourselves in our thinking from the real-life contexts in which questions about the meaning of a word or an order actually come up, contexts in which, more often than not, such questions are typically no harder to answer than is the American tourist's question about the meaning of the Roman policeman's order.

Wittgenstein employs a variety of strategies in his attempts to expose the rule-following skeptic's fantasy as such, but for our purposes, two in particular are especially relevant.

2.2.1. Strategy 1: Assembling Recollections for a Particular Purpose

The first of these involves reminding his readers of the ways we ordinarily think and talk about gulfs

[8] See her "Realism and the Realistic Spirit."

between rules and their meanings.[9] We see this, for example, at *Investigations* §85:

> 85. A rule stands there like a signpost. — Does the signpost leave no doubt about the way I have to go? Does it show which direction I am to take when I have passed it, whether along the road or the footpath or cross-country? But where does it say which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (for example) in the opposite one? — And if there were not a single signpost, but a sequence of signposts or chalk marks on the ground — is there only *one* way of interpreting them? — So I can say that the signpost does after all leave room for doubt. *Or rather, it sometimes leaves room for doubt, and sometimes not. And now this is no longer a philosophical proposition, but an empirical one.*[10]

A signpost is an expression of a kind of rule—a rule for how to proceed along a road or a path. And as with other rules, the majority of §85 is supposed to indicate, one might get worked up about the fact that signposts admit or anyway might appear to admit of an overwhelming variety of interpretations. But—Wittgenstein means to show us in the bits I have emphasized—concern with this vertigo-inducing variety of interpretations is a sign, not of having achieved some insight into the naïveté exhibited by most of us in our routine dealings with signposts, but of having gotten caught up in philosophical fantasy. The point is simply to remind us what it really is like to encounter a sign, to help us remember that when we encounter a signpost in the course of our ordinary lives, we typically do not find ourselves needing to choose one among infinite possible interpretations. Far from it: more often than not, there is no need to choose because there are no options to choose between, no choice to make. For most people, most of the time, a reasonably well-made sign neither needs nor even so much as *brooks* interpretation. (How am I supposed to "interpret" a sign that obviously says El Paso is 250 miles down the road?) Having recalled this humdrum fact to his readers' attention, Wittgenstein hopes they might begin to wonder at the skeptic's insistence that between every rule and its meaning there stands a gulf that must be filled by an "act of understanding."

This general thought comes out even more clearly in *Investigations* §213:

---

[9] Cf. *Investigations* §127.
[10] Emphasis added.

> 213. "But this initial segment of a series could obviously be variously interpreted (for example, by means of algebraic expressions), so you must first have chosen *one* such interpretation." — Not at all! A doubt was possible in certain circumstances. But that is not to say that I did doubt, or even *could* doubt.[11]

Here as before, the idea is to bring us back down to earth—to remind us of what it is actually like to use the words with which we have become concerned and so to help us see more clearly what it looks like when they are not idling but doing their work.[12] The distinctive feature of this passage that makes it worth quoting is the last bit, where Wittgenstein makes explicit his observation that, very often, it is not just that as a matter of fact I do *not* doubt that I am following the rule rightly, but, in addition, that in many cases I wouldn't even so much as know *how* to do so. When, for example, I read in a bread recipe that I am to mix one tablespoon of salt and two tablespoons of sugar in with the flour before I add the water, it is hard even to make sense of the idea that I might have misunderstood the rule—that, in other words, there might be some gulf between its expression and its content that I need to bridge. For here the meaning of the rule is patent—the rule wears its meaning on its face, as it were. Were someone to ask me how I can be sure what the recipe requires of me, I simply wouldn't understand what he was asking—this despite the fact that, if I set my mind to it, I probably could come up with a whole bunch of odd ways of interpreting it.[13] Here as before, Wittgenstein's hope is that this observation will give pause to those taken in by the skeptic's fantasy.

We see the same strategy at work in some of Wittgenstein's remarks on the closely-related concept of explaining the meaning of a word. Consider, for instance, the rest of a passage we considered earlier. After his hypothetical interlocutor has worked himself up into a panic about how he might come to know who the name "Moses" is supposed to designate, Wittgenstein makes the following remark:

> 87. As though an explanation, as it were, hung in the air unless supported by another one.

---

[11] Emphasis added.
[12] Cf. *Investigations* §132.
[13] I take this example from Finkelstein. For talk of the face of a rule in Wittgenstein, see (*inter alia*) *Investigations* §228.

> Whereas an explanation may indeed rest on another one that has been given, but none stands in need of another — unless *we* require it to avoid a misunderstanding. One might say: an explanation serves to remove or to prevent a misunderstanding — one, that is, that would arise if not for the explanation, but not every misunderstanding that I can imagine.
>
> It may easily look as if every doubt merely *revealed* a gap in the foundations; so that secure understanding is possible only if we first doubt everything that *can* be doubted, and then remove all these doubts.
>
> The signpost is in order — if, under normal circumstances, it serves its purpose.[14]

Or again, consider *Investigations* §§208 and 210:

> 208. How do I explain the meaning of "regular", and "uniform", "same" to anyone? — I'll explain these words to someone who, say, speaks only French by means of the corresponding French words. But if a person has not yet got the *concepts*, I'll teach him to use the words by means of *examples* and by *exercises*. — *And when I do this, I do not communicate less to him than I know myself.*

> 210. "But do you really explain to the other person what you yourself understand? Don't you leave it to him to *guess* the essential thing? You give him examples — but he has to guess their drift, to guess your intention." — *Every explanation which I can give myself I give to him too. — "He guesses what I mean" would amount to: "various interpretations of my explanation come to his mind, and he picks one of them". So in this case he could ask; and I could and would answer him.*[15]

Once we have lost sight of the ways doubts about the meanings of words come up and are settled in the course of ordinary life, it is easy to get caught up in exactly the sort of panic in which Wittgenstein's interlocutor finds himself in *Investigations* §87. It can seem as though it were the case, not only that the name "Moses" itself demands further explanation, but that the words that compose any explanation we might be given do as well—that, if we are to understand what a word means, another speaker should have to somehow communicate to us something for which—it now appears—words could not but be hopelessly inadequate vehicles. But, Wittgenstein reminds his interlocutor with characteristic brusqueness, "the signpost is in order — if, under normal circumstances, it serves its purpose." The point, once again, is to remind us that although the meaning of a signpost might from time to time come into question (as might that of any sign), it often does not—indeed, as we saw a moment ago, often *could* not.

---

[14] Translation modified.
[15] Emphasis added.

Of course, sometimes people do find themselves unsure as to what a word means, who a name designates, what a sign directs us to do, etc. But in these cases it is typically clear what it would take to explain things to them. Perhaps someone is unsure whether when I say "Moses" I am referring to the biblical figure or to the old man who lives down the street. So she can ask, and I can indicate, which I mean, and that will be the end of it; no nebulous, extra-linguistic *something* need pass between us. When the concerns that exercise the skeptic are in this way brought down from the clouds and put back into the contexts in which we are familiar with them, over and over again we find that they lose their power.[16] Here nothing seems mysterious, words don't appear powerless. What Wittgenstein hopes to bring out by doing this over and over again is that we are confused about the source of our difficulties. We think we have to understand something inscrutable, but this is fantasy. The reality is that doubt, understanding, explanation, interpretation—these are all phenomena that take place amidst and can only come into view against the background of a more-or-less shared understanding of the linguistic practice. Our troubles arise when and because we lose sight of that.[17]

There is a way of misunderstanding what Wittgenstein is up to in these passages common enough to be worth mentioning before turning to the other strategy for exposing the skeptic's fantasy I want to discuss. One might be puzzled at the critical use of the term "fantasy," which suggests that the skeptic's words have only the *appearance* of meaningfulness. For this suggestion, it can easily seem, goes significantly beyond the evidence provided. What has been shown, it can seem, is not that there is in fact nothing for the skeptic to mean by his words, that there is in fact no problem where the skeptic sees one, but rather just that the uses of language we see in the articulation of skeptical doubts are *unusual* and the problems that preoccupy rule-following skeptics

[16] Cf. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 217-221.
[17] The point here is similar to the one Heidegger makes in *Being and Time* about the existence of the external world. See *Being and Time*, division one, part III. You might say that meaning is a phenomenon that only shows itself when we are, in Hubert Dreyfus' terms, skillfully coping with our world and our fellow speakers.

overlooked.

Understandable as it is, this reaction misses the essential point of Wittgenstein's criticism. Wittgenstein's aim is not *just* to point out that the skeptic's words *diverge* from ordinary usage. Whatever interest that project might have, the objection is correct to suggest that, by itself, it cuts no critical ice against the skeptic, as Wittgenstein himself certainly realized. He intended such observations not, as the objection suggests, as an end in themselves, but rather as a sort of provocation. Having reminded the rule-following skeptic of the contours of ordinary usage, Wittgenstein hopes to prompt a certain sort of reflection. He wants to put the skeptic back on his heels, to prompt him to ask himself what it actually looks like for people to do the things we call knowing the meaning of a word, explaining its meaning, interpreting an ambiguous sign, etc.—when the meanings of signs actually do come into question for us and how we deal with those situations. And he wants the skeptic to ask himself: in which if any of these ways is *he* using the relevant words when he attempts to articulate his skeptical doubts? Wittgenstein's hunch is that the skeptic will find that, for any ordinary usage of the relevant words he can come up with, that usage will lack the devastating critical force the skeptic hitherto took his words to have. And, he hopes, this discovery will prompt the skeptic to wonder whether his words ever had any such force to begin with.

Consider, for instance, the skeptic's question as to how the student is to know that carrying out the order "+2" requires that he write "1,002" after "1,000." While it would certainly be odd, it's not so hard to imagine a student understanding the order to mean that he is to write the series of even numbers up to "1,000" and then continue the series by writing every fourth number up to 2,000, every sixth number up to 3,000, etc. How is the student to realize that she's misunderstood? What can she do to recognize her error? Well, suppose that she does go on to write "1,004, 1,008, …" after "1,000," and the teacher balks. The student can then ask: "Is that not right? Was I supposed to do things differently?" And the teacher may then explain that it's not; "after 1,000," he

can tell the student, "you should have written 1,002, 1,004, and so on, just as you did when you began at 0." More likely than not, that would be the end of it. If this did not suffice, if the student kept on making mistakes, as I suppose might happen, we would not conclude that it is impossible to know how to continue the series, but that the student is perhaps incorrigible, or at the very least that it is going to take more or a different kind of instruction than we are used to for her to cotton on. And were someone to suggest that we in fact ought to conclude that this episode shows it is indeed impossible to know how to continue the series, the response would be, roughly, and in full, "Huh?"

In the background of all this is a rich vision of language that is for the most part only hinted at by Wittgenstein himself. One aspect of this vision is a kind of radical contextualism according to which the meanings of our words are dependent in enormous and uncodifiable ways on the circumstances and contexts in which we use them. Consequently, Wittgenstein thinks that the *only* way to determine what a given utterance means is by bringing to bear on that utterance the sensibilities we acquire by learning language and in virtue of which we count as competent speakers, asking ourselves what we might mean were we to utter the relevant words in the relevant circumstances—by considering, in Austin's words, "*what we should say when*, and so why and what we should mean by it."[18]

Another, absolutely crucial aspect of Wittgenstein's vision is that there are limits to the ways in which we might intelligibly use an expression, limits that are *only* discernible by competent speakers through this kind of immanent interrogation of our linguistic practices. This might be thought an objectionable form of conservatism, one that sees us as bound to whatever forms of expression we find ourselves with. But the point is not at all to deny that languages can change over time as new words are introduced and new usages are coined; the thought, rather, is that new words are introduced only by stipulating for them a use of a familiar sort, or by stipulating for them a new

[18] Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," p. 129 (emphasis in the original). On this general approach, Cavell, "Must We Mean What We Say?"

usage introduced by extending or altering some older, more familiar one in comprehensible ways—comprehensible, again, from the point of view of competent speakers bringing to bear their linguistic sensibilities on the examination of particular, contextually situated usages of words.[19]

The strategy for exposing the skeptic's fantasy that I have been discussing is informed by this vision of language. A crucial—indeed perhaps *the central*—Wittgensteinian insight is that, very often when doing philosophy, we find ourselves attempting to "speak outside language games," in Stanley Cavell's evocative phrase.[20] That is to say, we attempt to use words and phrases in ways and in contexts for which no place has been prepared by our practice and of which there is accordingly no sense to be made. In doing so, we are liable think we have somehow managed to transfer the meaning the relevant utterance has in those contexts in which it is at home with it into whichever new context in which we are trying to use it.[21] Wittgenstein's critical aim with these reminders about the contours of ordinary usage is to expose this impression as but a sort of hallucination of meaning,[22] to activate our linguistic sensibilities and thereby draw to our attention the discrepancy between what we can mean by our words and what we are trying to say—or better, since there is in fact nothing to be said, what we *think* we are trying to say. In such cases, it's true, our words can be *given* a meaning by assimilating them to the sorts of usages for which our practices have prepared the way, but—so goes the Wittgensteinian thought—these more familiar ways of using the relevant word(s) will strike us, when we are in a philosophical mood, as falling short of what we really meant. Pressed to say what we did mean, Wittgenstein suspects, we will find ourselves unable to make ourselves understood in ways that feel true to us. The conclusion Wittgenstein wants us to draw is, not—as we are wont to do—that ordinary language is simply inadequate to our purposes, but that

[19] On this aspect of Wittgenstein's thought see Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment*, ch.1, §§3-4, esp. pp. 40-43. And cf. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 171-173.
[20] See *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, pp. 206-207.
[21] Cf. *Investigations* §117.
[22] Cf. *Investigations* §260.

we in fact never meant anything at all by our words to begin with.[23]

2.2.2. Strategy 2: Exposing Logical Chimeras

Another way Wittgenstein tries to expose the skeptic's fantasy is by showing how, as he puts it at *Investigations* §94, "our forms of expression…send us in pursuit of chimeras."

In ancient Greek mythology, the chimera was a strange animal formed by the combination of several different animals—in Homer's telling, "a foaming monster...of ghastly and inhuman origin, her forepart lionish, her tail a snake's, a she-goat in between. This thing exhaled in jets a rolling fire."[24] Similarly, the kinds of chimeras Wittgenstein has in mind—following Cora Diamond and Jim Conant, we can call them "logical chimeras"—are fantastic entities constructed through confused attempts at combining into one thing a variety of different logical features.[25] Crucial to the point of the analogy is that, like the chimera Homer wrote about, a logical chimera is, so to speak, mythological or fantastic: as Jim Conant puts the point, a logical chimera is "the appearance of a kind of combination which if we think it through is only the illusion of a combination of features."[26]

One of the clearest and most dramatic examples in Wittgenstein's writings of an attempt to show how our language sends us in pursuit of logical chimeras comes in *Investigations* §§193-194, in what we might call the parable of the super-rigid machine. In this section of the text, Wittgenstein is engaged with an interlocutor—call him the platonist about rules—who, having been taken in by rule-following skepticism, makes a desperate attempt to reconcile two apparently irreconcilable pictures of what is going on when we learn to follow rules and teach others to do the same. On the

---

[23] Cf. *Investigations* §464. For thoughtful discussions of this mode of criticism and the view of language and conception of nonsense that underlie it, see, in addition to those sources cited earlier in this paragraph, Diamond, "What Nonsense Might Be"; Conant, "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use"; and Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment*, chs. 2-3.
[24] Homer, *Iliad*, book VI, lines 179-182.
[25] For this term as well as for my understanding of the role of logical chimeras and the parable of the super-rigid machine in Wittgenstein's thought I am deeply indebted to lectures given by Cora Diamond and James Conant at the 7th annual summer school, organized by the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society and held August 5-8, 2015 in Kirchberg am Wechsel, Austria. Especially relevant are the lectures from sessions 4 and 5.
[26] The quote comes from lecture 4, around 1:04:45.

one hand, we have the picture of a rule as a kind of infallible guide, something that tells us what we are to do at each step; on the other we have the messy, real-life practice of teaching and learning rules, conducted as it is using words and gestures that—so it has come to seem to the platonist—always admit of misunderstandings and so *demand* interpretation. Put together, these pictures make it hard to resist the obviously unacceptable conclusion that the usual modes of instruction could not possibly enable the teacher to convey to his student the nature of the pattern she is to enact. The platonist's idea is that the way to solve this problem is by thinking of the meaning of the rule as some *thing* that stands behind the teacher's order "+2" and determines the way it is meant—some intrinsically meaningful item that would enable the student to determine in every case what it would take to apply the rule or execute the order. (For reasons that will become clear shortly, its nature is intentionally left indeterminate in Wittgenstein's text.) If the student were able to somehow see his way *through* the teacher's unavoidably ambiguous explanations and instructions and grasp this thing, whatever exactly it is, she would no longer be in any doubt about how the series is supposed to be extended after 1,000.[27] For unlike the teacher's words, *this* thing does not admit of more than one interpretation. It is *intrinsically* meaningful and so stops the regress; as Wittgenstein puts the platonist's thought in *The Blue Book*, "every sign is capable of interpretation; but the *meaning* mustn't be capable of interpretation. It is the last interpretation."[28] In the platonist's mind, the only question worth asking here is accordingly how the student might manage to get hold of this amorphous regress-stopper.

It is at this point in the dialectic that Wittgenstein introduces the idea of the super-rigid machine as a sort of analogue of the regress-stopper with which his interlocutor is preoccupied. Here the confusion stems from the observation that we can treat a machine or a picture thereof as a

[27] At *Investigations* §218 and elsewhere Wittgenstein portrays the process the platonist envisions here as that of engaging mental wheels with an infinitely long set of rails.
[28] *The Blue Book*, p. 34.

sort of symbol of its way of acting or its mode of operation (its *Wirkungsweise*, Wittgenstein says). Thus we can say (for instance) that in a sense a machine contains its *Wirkungweise* within itself, and—accordingly—that once we have familiarized ourselves with the machine "everything else, in particular the movements it will make, seem already to be completely determined."[29] Trouble arises once we reflect on the fact that any real-life machine is liable to break down or malfunction. In light of this possibility, this way of speaking can easily come to strike us as puzzling. It seems right that the future movements of the machine are all determined in advance, and yet—it also seems—that *cannot possibly be* the case! For when dealing with any actual machine, we can never rule out ahead of time the possibility of a malfunction. At this point we are liable to think the solution may lie in thinking of talk of the machine as containing its *Wirkungsweise* within itself as a *description* of a kind of *super*-machine, of which blueprints would be literal *pictures*. Like the real-life machine, the super-rigid machine is supposed to be in some sense instantiated and at least epistemically accessible if not quite palpable, but unlike any actual machine, it is supposed to be incapable of malfunctioning. But what, the parable is intended to prompt us to ask ourselves, could possibly have all these features? Wittgenstein's thought is that the search for an answer will leave us empty-handed and—he hopes—prompt us to wonder whether or not the ideally rigid machine we thought we were after was really just a chimera, a fantasy born of a misunderstanding of the grammar of talk of the machine's *Wirkungsweise* being in it from the start.

Similarly with the regress-stopper by getting hold of which, the platonist about rules hopes, the student might bridge the super-gulf that yawns between his teacher's order and its meaning. In order that it might express the meaning of the order, this "last interpretation" must presumably be couched in words, just like any other interpretation.[30] But unlike other interpretations, it is supposed to be *impossible* to misunderstand: otherwise it could not stop the regress. And so, here again,

[29] *Investigations* §193 (translation modified).
[30] This is clearer in *The Blue Book*, p. 34, than in the *Investigations*.

Wittgenstein hopes his readers will ask themselves: what could *possibly* satisfy these constraints? Nothing, it seems: for if the regress-stopper is to be couched in words, as it seems it must, we will be able to envision cases in which it will be misunderstood and so itself require interpretation, but if it is to stop the regress, there *mustn't be* any such cases.[31] The hoped-for result is that, having seen that this regress-stopper is nothing but a chimera, the platonist will re-examine the assumption, which she shares with the skeptic, that sent her in search of it in the first place, namely that super-gulfs are ubiquitous.[32]

* * *

In both these ways, then—reminding us of the ways we ordinarily think and talk about gulfs between words and their meanings and helping us to see how our words send us in pursuit of logical chimeras—Wittgenstein means to help his readers to see that the right response to the skeptic's questions is, not to elaborate some complicated account of how we can bridge the super-gulf that she's gotten herself worked up about, but rather just to request some clarification. Asked, for instance, how I know what the instruction "mix one tablespoon of salt and two tablespoons of sugar in with the flour before adding the water" requires me to do at *this* point,[33] I should simply say: "What's to understand? Isn't the instruction clear enough as is?"[34]

2.3. The Debunkers' Fantasy

There are of course many differences between rule-following skepticism and the evolutionary debunking arguments I discussed in the previous chapter. However—I want now to suggest—there is also a highly significant similarity: just like skepticism about following rules, two of these debunking arguments stem from and rest on a confused conception of the ways we might go wrong

[31] Cf. Finkelstein, "Wittgenstein on Rules and Platonism," p. 63.
[32] Cf. *Investigations* §§308-309 and Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment*, pp. 23-25.
[33] Cf. *Investigations* §198.
[34] Cf. Finkelstein, "Wittgenstein on Rules and Platonism," p. 69.

in our thinking, one that only seems compelling when we are caught up in philosophical fantasy. Once we see through the confusion, I'll argue, it becomes clear that evolutionary debunking arguments of these kinds give us no reason to think our ethical beliefs are unjustified.

Though both the first and the second way of defending debunking arguments discussed in chapter 1 ultimately depend on this same confusion, the majority of my discussion centers on the second, underdetermination-based rejoinder. Due to Sharon Street, this argument in effect alleges that, regarding any ethical claim P, there is always room to ask whether or not it is *really* the case that P, where the point of the question—call it a "really question"—is that we might be radically, systematically mistaken in our ethical thinking; in other words, the point is that there might be something like what I have been calling a super-gulf, in this case not between our words and their meanings but between our ethical beliefs and the facts. The argument contends, moreover, that the evidence available to us in ethical reflection is always and necessarily going to be too weak to allow us to rule out that possibility. In my view, however, the very idea that we might be mistaken in this way is confused, a product of philosophical fantasy just like the super-gulf that figures in rule-following skepticism.

Ultimately, I will argue that this same fantasy is equally at work in the first, Harman-inspired defense of debunking arguments I discussed (see §1.2.2). For the time being, however, I want focus on bringing out the ways it shows up in Street's underdetermination-based defense. I will do so using the same two strategies Wittgenstein uses in the rule-following case: by adducing reminders of the ways we ordinarily think and talk about gulfs between our ethical beliefs and the facts, and by trying to bring out the chimerical character of the kind of investigation questions about super-gulfs seem to invite us to undertake. In the next two sections, I discuss each of these at length, beginning with the first.

2.4. Strategy 1: Reminders of the Ordinary

Street's claim is that realism precludes the possibility that we might come to know ethical facts via reflection because it entails that the evidence available for ethical claims can never be such as to allow us to rule out the possibility that we are radically mistaken. Now, since Street's claim about the nature of ethical reflection is perfectly general, it entails that, for any particular ethical claim *whatsoever*, we not only can make sense of the possibility that we are radically mistaken about its truth value but, in addition, cannot rule that possibility out (at least if we assume realism). We can accordingly evaluate Street's argument by considering how plausible its implications are in particular cases. Since I think this makes the problem with that argument easier to see, that is what I propose to do, focusing on an episode from Cormac McCarthy's remarkable novel, *Blood Meridian*.

Early in *Blood Meridian*—a western set mostly in Texas and Northern Mexico in the mid-19th century—we meet a remarkable character introduced simply as "the judge." When we meet him the judge is in Nacogdoches, Texas; it has been raining for fourteen days continuously, and people are gathered in a tent listening to a preacher who has been holding a revival there since the rain began. The judge enters the tent, walks up to the front by the preacher, interrupts him, and addresses the crowd:

> Ladies and gentlemen I feel it my duty to inform you that the man holding this revival is an imposter. He holds no papers of divinity from any institution recognized or improvised. He is altogether devoid of the least qualification to the office he has usurped and has only committed to memory a few passages from the good book for the purposes of lending to his fraudulent sermons some faint flavor of the piety he despises. In truth, the gentleman standing before you posing as a minister of the Lord is not only totally illiterate but is also wanted by the law in the states of Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Arkansas.
>
> [...]
>
> On a variety of charges the most recent of which involved a girl of eleven years—I said eleven—who had come to him in trust and whom he was surprised in the act of violating while actually clothed in the livery of his God.

[...]

> Not three weeks before this he was run out of Fort Smith Arkansas for having congress with a goat. Yes lady, that is what I said. Goat.[35]

Not surprisingly, chaos ensues. Guns are fired, people are trampled, and a posse begins to form for the purpose of pursuing the preacher. Shortly thereafter, the judge buys people drinks at a nearby saloon. We learn then that the judge not only has never been to Fort Smith, but has never even seen the preacher before. "Never even heard of him," he adds.[36]

I take it that, before even thinking about it explicitly, most readers will have formed the opinion that it was wrong of the judge to say what he did here. Yet Street would have us take seriously the possibility that that belief is false. So I want to take some time to consider what it might actually look like for us to entertain the possibility that it was not *really* wrong for the judge to say what he did, to consider, as Austin so nicely put it, "*what we should say when*, and so why and what we should mean by it."[37] Suppose that we were to ask ourselves if in fact it might not have been wrong of the judge to say what he did. What exactly might this look like? How might a question like this arise? And what sorts of considerations might lead us to ask it?

2.4.1. Non-Evolutionary Gulfs

I can think of at least two types of question we might be asking here.

Often when we ask questions like this our concern is that we might have failed to rule out the possibility that some salient fact obtains, as when the possibility that he might have been trying to kill a lethal insect that was about to bite her leads me to reconsider my judgment that it was wrong of my brother-in-law to slap my niece's arm (I take it such facts are defeating conditions for the relevant defeasible generalizations). Given that, in the case as described in the novel, it is clear

---

[35] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, p. 7.
[36] *Blood Meridian*, p. 9. The whole story is contained on pp. 5-9.
[37] Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," p. 129.

that the judge had absolutely no reason to think that what he was saying was true and that his purpose in lying as he did was not to help anyone, to prevent anyone from being injured or anything of the sort, it is hard to see how this kind of question might come up. But that becomes much easier if we alter that case just slightly.

Consider, for instance a variant of the original case in which we don't know what the judge's intentions were. Perhaps his true purpose in saying what he did was to disperse the people in the crowd so that they might escape any harm they might otherwise suffer from a fast-approaching explosion. Suppose too that, for all we know, the judge had taken steps to ensure that the preacher would not be harmed nor his reputation tarnished. Otherwise, let things be as described in *Blood Meridian*.

Here it's easy to see what might lead us to wonder whether or not it was *really* wrong of the judge to say what he did. For, we might think, if this really was the judge's intention, then although his methods would certainly have been unorthodox, and although it is, at the very least, unclear whether or not his methods are likely to be effective, in this case it would at least be true that the judge's intentions were good, and so the possibility that his act was not wrong after all seems at least worth exploring. If we can rule out the possibilities that these were in fact his intentions and that he had in fact taken such precautions, we can be confident in our initial impression. But if not, we would do well to reconsider.

In some cases, though, our questions go much deeper. *Blood Meridian* is a dark, violent book—"arguably the bloodiest work of serious literature since the *Iliad*"[38]—and it presents a distinctive and unsettling vision of the world. Some sense of this is afforded by this vivid description of the book, due to Ian Moore:

> Set in Mexico and the American Southwest in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War and based on historical events, [*Blood Meridian*] tells of a gang of mercenaries hired by the

[38] Wallach, "Twenty-Five Years of *Blood Meridian*," p. 5.

> Mexican government to decimate hostile Indians and submit their scalps as receipts. After some initial success hunting Apaches, the gang becomes less discerning, eventually slaughtering the very citizens whom they had contracted to protect. It turns out a Mexican scalp is not so easy to distinguish from an Apache one. Yet they are not the only perpetrators in this indiscriminate landscape. Comanches hang dead babies from a tree, "holes punched in their underjaws [...] Bald and pale and bloated, larval to some unreckonable being" (60). Members of one tribe crucify members of another (258). Chihuahuans display the decapitated head of an American enemy at a bazaar in the city plaza (73) while Indian scalps stream like flags from the cathedral (76). Churches serve only to bear traces of war and of a god absconded (27-28). And nature too is bloody and bellicose: "The sun was just down and to the west lay reefs of bloodred clouds up out of which rose little desert nighthawks like fugitives from some great fire at the earth's end" (23; cf. 110).[39]

On Moore's interpretation, the judge—an enormous, hairless, albino polymath—functions as a spokesman of sorts for the book's dark vision, advising the gang of scalp-hunters and criticizing those he sees as insufficiently ruthless.

As Moore spells out in detail, the judge sees the kinds of warfare and violence that permeate the novel as at once the ultimate test of a person's mettle and as the ideal setting for the realization of human excellence and flourishing. In Moore's words,

> For the judge, war is the governing principle of the universe, and if we are to live meaningfully and authentically, we must endeavor to correspond to it through our own acts of war.[40]

Or again: "We can live in accord with the war of the world and find value, freedom, and purpose in doing so, or we fail to do so and be shaped as but 'antic clay' (319; cf. 5)."[41] At one point the judge even goes so far as to say that "war is god"; Moore explains:

> "War is god" not only because it is the father of all and because it divines one's worth. War, the judge…indicates, also divinizes. It makes the warrior like the "godfire," all in one and one in all (252; cf. 255, 147).[42]

This background helps us to see the possibility of a very different reading of the judge's actions. Absent this context, the judge's act looks like a senseless, malicious act; in context, though,

---

[39] Moore, "Heraclitus and the Metaphysics of War in *Blood Meridian*," p. 94. Moore's parenthetical references are to the edition of *Blood Meridian* cited in my bibliography.
[40] Ibid., p. 104.
[41] Ibid., p. 99.
[42] Ibid., p. 99.

we can see it for what it presumably is: an attempt at realizing human virtue and awakening others to its true nature. More importantly for our purposes, this background discloses the possibility of a very different kind of question about the moral status of the judge's act. In asking whether or not it was really wrong of the judge to publicly accuse the preacher of fraud and pedophilia, we can now see, a person might be wondering whether or not there is something to the judge's disturbing vision. Perhaps the judge is right after all. Perhaps he alone understands the true nature of virtue. And if so, can he be blamed for exemplifying it and thereby helping to show others the way?

Mulling this suggestion over, I might notice that the judge's view rests to a significant extent on what are just empirical claims about how people react in certain circumstances. Among other things, he seems to think that a person cannot find true fulfillment other than by engaging in warfare. Or again, he seems to take for granted that the violent, cutthroat conditions that serve as the setting for the novel are ineliminable. It is presumably at least in part for this reason that he thinks an unmitigated embrace of violence and chaotic disruption is the only rational response to the world. But—I might realize—neither of these views is obviously correct. In fact it seems that people flourish in many other ways—as artists, innovators, thinkers, and statesmen; as mothers and fathers, brothers, sisters, and friends; etc. Moreover it's hardly obvious that people really do flourish in war; at the very least, the prevalence and debilitating effects of PTSD suggest that, even if some do, many—perhaps most—do not. Nor is it obvious that the Hobbesian conditions in which the novel takes place are a permanent feature of human life. Without a doubt human beings have yet to realize a perfectly just, peaceful society among the majority of the world's population and for a significant length of time. Nevertheless, conditions in much of the world and for many people are far, far better than those that form the setting of *Blood Meridian*, and it is not at all obvious that it is reasonable to respond to such conditions as though they were not, much less that this sort of response is compulsory for those who would display human excellence.

Whatever the results of such reflection, the important thing for our purposes is that, were we to second-guess ourselves for *this* reason, we would be asking a much deeper sort of question than in the first case. There we took for granted the principles on which our reasoning was based, asking only whether or not we had applied them correctly in the case at hand; here, the principles themselves come in for scrutiny.

2.4.2. Evolutionary Gulfs

Of course, when she deploys her argument against the possibility of knowledge of objective ethical facts in the context of her evolutionary debunking argument, Street means to motivate the suggestion that we might be mistaken by appealing to evolutionary considerations: given their provenance, she means to invite us to ask ourselves, mightn't our beliefs be false? More to the point, then, are the ways such considerations might lead us to second-guess our initial impression of the judge. As before, we can make out both more superficial cases in which our concerns revolve around the possibility that some salient defeating condition threatens the applicability of the principle we have invoked and deeper ones in which we reconsider our principles.

For a case of the first type, consider a variant of the *Blood Meridian* case in which the judge is my brother-in-law, and in the past, the preacher caused a mutual family member of ours great and unjustifiable suffering. Perhaps he was once married to the judge's wife and my sister and, during that time, violently abused her. In this variant of the case, the question whether or not it was really wrong of the judge to say what he did gets a grip. For even here, I suppose, I can imagine finding myself inclined to treat the fact that the preacher hurt someone the judge and I love as reason to think an act—the judge's—of a sort that would otherwise be wrong is not wrong in this case—that is, as what I am calling a defeating condition. At this point, though, certain evolutionary considerations might well give me pause. After all, it seems plausible that part of the explanation for

the fact that the question here finds purchase has to do with our evolutionary past. In particular, it seems plausible that there is some reproductive advantage to strongly resenting or even being inclined to act violently toward or cause harm to those who harm your kin, regardless of whether or not one in fact ought to act on such feelings.[43] So although it is clear that the alleged defeating condition—that the preacher hurt someone the judge and I love—obtains, these evolutionary reflections lead me to wonder whether or not it really does have the significance I initially took it to have.

In thinking about this possibility, the natural strategy seems to me to try to find some way to lessen the distorting influence of my personal relationships and thereby get a clearer sense of the significance of the various facts of the case. Most obviously, I might consider similar cases to which I do not have a personal connection. Or I might reflect on the case in more general terms, perhaps considering what life would be like were all citizens to take matters into their own hands rather than relying on the state to administer justice. Or again, I might think about the purposes of punishment—do we punish criminals to deter crime or as a form of retribution?—and whether or not the judge's actions effectively serve that purpose. Even more generally, I might wonder whether or not it is ever the case that a person deserves to suffer. Having reflected on the case in these ways, I might then conclude that I had in fact been misled by the inclinations with which natural selection endowed me and change my mind about the moral status of the judge's act. In fact, I might then conclude, he did act wrongly. And, assuming I have ruled out other potential defeating conditions for my belief, it would at that point be reasonable of me to consider the gulf between my beliefs and the facts closed.[44]

---

[43] This is just speculation. Should evolutionary biologists find evidence that natural selection would not in fact have favored (and so as a matter of fact did not favor) this tendency, the possibility that the influence of natural selection might have caused us to go astray here would not be salient, at least not in the way I'm discussing here. More generally, reflection about these matters is (of course) always be beholden to the best available science.

[44] Some readers may disagree with the specific ethical conclusions I have reached in the last few paragraphs, but for my purposes it makes no difference whether or not I am right in these particular cases. All that matters for my argument is

Evolutionary considerations might also lead us to reconsider our principles in something like the same way as did the possibility that it is in fact the judge's own dark vision that it is closer to the truth. In fact, it is plausible that our evolutionary inheritance might have led us to overlook precisely this possibility. After all, it seems likely that natural selection would favor the pro-social impulses that find expression in the conclusion that the judge ought not to have acted as he did over the destructive, anti-social impulses that would seem to find expression in the opposite conclusion, since the former seem far more likely to promote cooperation and, thereby, success for one's group than do the latter. What is not clear, though, is that their being motivated in this way entails that these concerns cannot be dealt with in the same way as before—by considering the effects warfare seems to have on people, other ways people seem to be able to flourish, etc.

2.4.3. Lessons and Distinctions

These considerations suggest a couple of potentially surprising conclusions.

In each of these cases, the possibility becomes salient that there is a gulf of sorts between our beliefs about the moral status of the judge's act and the corresponding facts. Notice, though, that all of these gulfs seem to be akin, not to the super-gulf that exercises the rule-following skeptic, but instead to that which opens up for the American tourist between the Roman police officer's order and its meaning: like that word-meaning gulf, these belief-fact gulfs are such that, though not necessarily easy to bridge, it at least more-or-less clear what it would *take* to bridge them. And like the interpretive process that enables the tourist to discern the meaning of the police officer's words, the processes I mentioned whereby we might bridge these belief-fact gulfs—ruling out any salient defeating conditions and reflectively examining the principles on which we have relied—are familiar and straightforward, at least in principle if not always in practice. Here, we might say, we know our

---

that reflection on ethical matters has roughly the shape I say it does.

way about.

Interestingly, this seems no less true in the latter two cases, in which reconsideration of some judgment regarding the moral status of the judge's act is prompted by evolutionary considerations, than in the former two, in which this was not the case. For my part I am inclined to think this conclusion generalizes: in general, closing the kinds of gulfs evolutionary considerations might reasonably lead us to worry yawn between our ethical beliefs and the facts is neither more nor less difficult than closing gulfs that, like the one that figures in the first case, have nothing whatsoever to do with evolution.

None of this is to say that Street and like-minded skeptics are wrong to think evolutionary considerations give us reason to be on our guard against the possibility that our ethical beliefs are mistaken. In fact I think they are quite right about that. Assuming, as I am happy to, that the evolutionary influences on our thinking are unrelated to the truth of our beliefs, I agree that realists have reason to be concerned about the possibility that there is a gulf of sorts between any ethical or epistemic beliefs we might form and the facts. For, as Street says, if those influences were not truth-tracking, it is hard to see how we might escape the conclusions that our evolutionary past has left us with myriad misleading unreflective evaluative tendencies and that we are accordingly liable to go astray. But I differ from these skeptics on just *how* our evolutionary heritage might lead us astray. Street is committed to saying that the errors the possibility that we might have fallen into which one might appeal to evolutionary considerations to motivate are so deep, so pervasive, that nothing we could possibly do could be enough to rule them out. I, on the other hand, think that the kinds of mistakes we are liable to make in virtue of the evolutionary influences on our thought are not basically different from any other mistakes we might make in our ethical thinking and are, accordingly, no less reflectively tractable.

With all of this background in place, we are now in a better position to critically examine this

disagreement.

2.4.4. The Skeptic's Super-Gulf

Earlier we saw that the rule-following skeptic wants to suggest that the possibility of interpreting expressions of rules in different ways reveals a super-gulf between orders and their meanings, one that is deeper and harder to bridge than the run-of-the-mill gulf the tourist encounters. Just so, I think Street wants to say, we can appeal to the evolutionary considerations she adduces to motivate the possibility that there is a super-gulf between our beliefs and the facts that is deeper and harder to bridge than the run-of-the-mill gulfs of the kind I have been discussing. For given that the ways in which natural selection has shaped our ethical thinking are, at least as far as their reliability is concerned, practically random, there is just no reason to think that what seems to us to be true in fact is. Thus, she wants to say, even *after* we have surveyed the facts of—say—the original *Blood Meridian* case, ruled out any defeating conditions we or anyone else of whom we are aware can think of, and considered carefully the truth and relevance of any principles on which we are relying in our reasoning, even then we might be mistaken in thinking it was wrong of the judge to say what he did. Just as the rule-following skeptic insists that nothing the teacher might say in an attempt to explain to his student what it would take to follow the order "+2" could enable the student to discern that order's meaning, Street wants to say that, assuming realism, *no* amount of what appears to be evidence we might amass for this claim about the judge might license us to conclude that it was, in fact, wrong of him to say what he did. *However* much evidence there might appear to be for a claim, *however* inconceivable it might seem that, given the apparent evidence available to us, the belief that evidence appears to support is nevertheless false—*somehow*, she wants to say, our belief might *still* be false.

Once we have become concerned about this alleged super-gulf and taken ourselves to need

to find some way to bridge it, the kind of evidence a person might normally use to justify her adoption of the belief that it was wrong of the judge to say what he did cannot but look impotent, just as the interpretive process the American tourist in Rome goes through to make sense of the policeman's order is supposed to be powerless to bridge the rule-following skeptic's super-gulf. In the original *Blood Meridian* case, for example, it might seem that I could justify my adoption of the belief that it was wrong of the judge to say what he did by saying that the judge did not know any of the claims he made to be true, that he knew or anyway should have known that saying what he did was liable to result in people getting hurt, and that—defeasibly, anyway—it is wrong both to knowingly make false claims about someone else (especially in a public forum) and knowingly to put someone in harm's way. These considerations might seem to do the trick. But, we have seen, while these sorts of considerations might suffice to close mundane belief-fact gulfs akin to the gulf between the Roman policeman's order and its content, they are not supposed to be enough to close Street's super-gulf. No matter how much putative evidence I adduce to indict the judge, anyone in the grip of the kinds of considerations that drive Street's argument will still want to ask: of course it *seems* like it was wrong of the judge to say what he did, but was it *really* wrong of him to do so?

In view of the considerations I rehearsed in §§2.4.1-2.4.3, we might be inclined to doubt there is any more sense to be made of this question than there is of the rule-following skeptic's. As I've said, I think that's the right reaction. But perhaps I'm mistaken. Perhaps Street and like-minded skeptics really have noticed the possibility of a kind of error the possibility of which realists must admit but that I have so far failed to notice. So let us ask: were an evolutionary skeptic to ask, regarding the case as described by McCarthy, whether or not it was *really* wrong of the judge to say what he did, what might he mean?

Clearly, the skeptic intends his question as a profound challenge to received ways of thinking about ethical questions, so it seems it would have to be about our principles rather than about

whether or not we have ruled out some alleged defeating condition. And we know, too, that his question is supposed to be motivated by the fact that natural selection has had a tremendous, non-truth-tracking influence on ethical thought and discourse. Of the questions I have mentioned, the one that comes closest to satisfying this description is the question about whether or not our evolutionary inheritance might have led us to overlook something like the possibility that it is in fact the judge's own dark vision that it is closer to the truth. But, notice, the evolutionary skeptic has to reject the suggestion that her question might be so understood. For as we have seen, the skeptic's question must differ from that about the correctness of judge's dark vision insofar as, according to the skeptic herself, the kinds of things I said we might do to answer that question are here supposed to be beside the point. If we are not to understand the skeptic's question in such a way that it admits of the normal sort of answer, though, how *are* we to understand it? It is not clear.

That we have reached this point in our conversation with the imaginary skeptic might understandably make us impatient, and we might be tempted to remind him of Wittgenstein's observation that "[w]here you can't look for an answer, you can't ask either, and that means: Where there's no logical method for finding a solution, the question doesn't make sense either."[45] Even so, none of this should not surprise us. As we have seen, the gulf supposedly made salient by the skeptic's question is supposed to be like ordinary belief-fact gulfs insofar as it is supposed to preclude our doing something that we are typically perfectly happy to call knowing the facts and is supposed to be motivated by considerations of a familiar enough sort. But it is also radically *unlike* the gulfs concern about the presence of which we elsewhere take to be motivated by such considerations, not just insofar as it is supposed to keep us from knowing facts that, under ordinary circumstances, we are perfectly content to take ourselves to know, such as that it was wrong of the judge to say what he did, but also insofar as the justifications we would normally take to amount to a

[45] *Philosophical Remarks*, p. 172.

perfectly adequate defense of our claim to know the ethical facts—even in light of the possibility that, given our evolutionary history, our evaluative tendencies are likely mostly misleading—are here supposed to be utterly impotent. That nothing could satisfy this description should have been obvious from the start. After all, it is not as though it were just a matter of personal preference that *this* is what we call knowing the facts, *these* what we call sufficient grounds holding some belief, *these* the kinds of challenges to our claims to knowledge we take to be relevant, and *these* the ways we take ourselves to be able to deal with such challenges. This is just *what it is* to know facts of the relevant sort, to be justified in believing that some such fact obtains, etc. And yet, we are being told, here is a possible doubt such that it both must be laid to rest if our claim to know is to be defensible but cannot be laid to rest using the only methods we know of for doing something we are prepared to call laying doubts to rest, a doubt that is supposed to be raised by certain evolutionary considerations even after we have done all that we take to be necessary to lay to rest doubts motivated in this way. How something so much as *could* satisfy these desiderata is, at best, unclear.

All of these considerations suggest that we should not be in quite such a hurry to *answer* the kinds of questions on which Street's argument turns; perhaps, as with those of the rule-following skeptic, we should instead begin by trying to make sense of them. When asked whether, though of course it *seems* like it was wrong of the judge to say what he did, it *really* was wrong of him to do so, perhaps the right response is not to say "yes, and here's why…" (followed by some elaborate account of how we have access to the objective ethical facts), but instead simply to ask: what is "*really*" even supposed to mean in this context? For before we can even make sense of the skeptic's questions, we need to know: given the facts of the case, just *how* could it be the case that it was not wrong of the judge to say what he did? Is it supposed to be false that, defeasibly, it is wrong knowingly to put someone in harm's way? Are we supposed to be wrong about some of the relevant facts of the case? Is there some potential defeating condition we are supposed to have failed to rule

out? Just what, exactly, is it that we are supposed to have failed to do? To even make so much as intelligible her suggestion that evolutionary considerations give us reason to think we might be mistaken in thinking it wrong of the judge to say what he did—to help us to understand what kind of gulf the super-gulf that is here supposed to yawn between our belief and the facts is supposed to *be* in the first place—Street and like-minded skeptics need to give us answers to these sorts of questions. The considerations I have laid out here lead me to doubt they can manage it, not just in this particular case, but in general.

Ironically, the problem here might be put by saying that it is not the realist but Street and like-minded philosophers who face an unpalatable dilemma. On the one hand, they might cave to the concerns I have raised, conceding that the questions they are pressing are after all not so different as they have claimed, that the gulf they are worried about can indeed be closed in the usual ways and so is not significantly different from others concern about which is motivated by evolutionary considerations. On the other, they might hold their ground, continuing to insist that *this* gulf is radically different from other such gulfs and that the ordinary ways of bridging belief-fact gulfs are here useless. In the first case, Street's whole problematic loses its bite and its interest, since it is neither especially worrisome nor especially newsworthy that we might be wrong in some cases and should be on guard against that possibility: we already know that and know what to do about it.[46] In the second, as I have said, it's not clear why we should take Street's "gulf" to be a gulf at all. For if I am right, she and her allies would in this case have failed to do the work necessary to make their doubts intelligible *as such*, i.e. *qua* doubts, and so while we might of course grant that there is some sense to be made of their words, it is not clear why we should view them as calling into question our claims to ethical knowledge. So: either the evolutionary challenge to the possibility of knowledge of objective ethical facts is uninteresting and easily dealt with, or it does not even amount

[46] Cf. *Investigations* §85.

to such a challenge. Either way, it lacks the devastating force its proponents take it to have.[47]

2.4.5. The Skeptic's Mistake: Ignoring the Rags

What explains the fact that evolutionary skeptics attribute so much importance to questions about fantastic super-gulfs? What leads them so far astray?

Wittgenstein thought that our tendency to pay too little attention to the ways we actually think and talk was the root of many of our difficulties in philosophy. For, he thought, it leads us to look in the wrong places for solutions and miss the answers to our questions that are staring us right in the face. At times he talks about this in a general way, as in the parable of the mouse and the rags at *Investigations* §52:

> 52. If I am inclined to suppose that a mouse comes into being by spontaneous generation out of grey rags and dust, it's a good idea to examine those rags very closely to see how a mouse could have hidden in them, how it could have got there, and so on. But if I am convinced that a mouse cannot come into being from these things, then this investigation will perhaps be superfluous.
>
> But what it is in philosophy that resists such an examination of details, we have yet to understand.[48]

More often, though, he is content to point out the ways this tendency leads us astray in particular cases. We have seen already how he does this in his remarks on rule-following. We see the same thing in the following passage, where he comments on a remark made by an imaginary interlocutor concerned with the so-called "problem of other minds":

> One says: How can these gestures, this way of holding the hand, this picture, be the wish that such and such were the case? It is nothing more than a hand over a table and stands there alone and without a *sense*! Like a single piece of scenery from the production of a play, which has been left by itself in a room. It had life only in the play.[49]

As I read this passage, the point is that the other minds skeptic's questions only come up, indeed can only even seem to make sense, once we have divorced ourselves in our thinking from the contexts in

[47] Dworkin directs similar remarks at Rorty at "Objectivity and Truth," p. 96.
[48] Cf. *Investigations* §51 and *Zettel* §314.
[49] *Zettel* §238 (translation modified).

which questions about the significance of others' expressions and gestures ordinarily come up. Just as a piece of scenery does not have the same significance outside of the context of the play, expressions and gestures only appear as meaningful, only show themselves *as* words and gestures, in what we might call the play of human life.[50]

The way Street and others sympathetic to her underdetermination-based challenge to the possibility of knowledge of objective ethical facts think about reflection suggests that, for whatever reason, they have failed to attend to the play in the way Wittgenstein recommends. I know of no other way to explain the fact that they insist, with apparently not the slightest reservation, that realists *must* answer questions of, to put it mildly, questionable intelligibility. My suggestion is that, had these philosophers made it a point to keep their heads in the game of giving and asking for ethical reasons—had they taken more time to ponder the rags, to pay more attention to the kinds of errors to which we take our evolutionary inheritance to make us liable, when and how we worry that we might have fallen into error, and what steps we take to rule out the possibility that we have—they might have noticed that we have available to us in ordinary language a set of perfectly familiar linguistic techniques and strategies for dealing with the belief-fact gulfs evolutionary considerations make salient. That is, they might have noticed that mice can indeed come from these rags. They might then have come to think it suspicious that, in contrast to the sorts of evolutionary doubts with which we deal all the time as a matter of course, it is wholly mysterious how *theirs* are to be laid to rest. And, had they done that, they might have taken pause before attributing so much importance to their questions and pressing the rest of us to take them so seriously.

---

[50] Compare Heidegger's discussion of readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) and presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*) in division one, part III of *Being and Time*, especially his discussion of Descartes on external world skepticism. I see my claims that words only show themselves as meaningful and that reasons only show themselves as such in the play of human life as not differing significantly from Heidegger's claim that a hammer, e.g., shows itself as such only in use. (In the above-mentioned lectures, James Conant appeals to this distinction of Heidegger's in explaining what Wittgenstein means when at *Investigations* §219 he talks about following a rule "blindly" [*blind*].)

2.5. Strategy 2: Exposing a Logical Chimera

Here someone might object that I am just being dense—that it is in fact perfectly obvious what the skeptic wants. What is being asked for, I will be told, is that we should set aside all of our ethical and related epistemic beliefs and compare the whole system to the facts from, so to speak, "sideways on."[51] Unless we can rule out the alleged possibility that they are not, the skeptic thinks, our beliefs cannot amount to knowledge (unless, of course, we abandon realism.) This objection brings us to the second strategy for exposing the evolutionary skeptic's fantasy that I want to discuss, namely, demonstrating the ways our language sends us in pursuit of chimeras. Before explaining where I think the objection goes wrong, I want to introduce an analogy it will prove useful to refer back to later on.

2.5.1. Hagiography

The objector's thought is, I think, well captured by an ingenious comparison I take from Cora Diamond.[52] There used to be a genre of writing called hagiography comprised of biographies of saints, and in hagiographical writings, it was apparently standard practice to say certain things about saints, regardless of whether or not they were true. (There even appear to have been guides that specified as much.[53]) We see an example of this when, in a biography of St. Francis called *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, we are told that he "did all in his power" to hide his stigmata from the other

[51] I take the phrase "sideways on" from John McDowell. McDowell only uses this phrase in *Mind and World* (see pp]. 34-36, 41-42) and "Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity" (see p. 214), but he articulates what seems to be basically the same thought I spell out here in many places. See, for instance, his "Critical Notice," §3 (esp. p. 380); "Two Sorts of Naturalism," §§9-12 (esp. pp. 187, 189, 191, 194, 197); and "Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics," §§5-6 (esp. pp. 35, 37). Though McDowell's thought is distinct, the Wittgensteinian provenance of McDowell's thinking about the unattainability of the view from sideways on (and about our "Neurathian predicament") is apparent from passages as early as this pregnant pronouncement from the preface to the *Tractatus* (my translation): "the aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to draw a limit to thought, we should have to be able to think both sides of the limit (so we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought). It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense."

[52] See "Realism and the Realistic Spirit," pp. 51-55

[53] See the sources cited at Diamond, "Realism and the Realistic Spirit," p. 71, note 31.

monks.[54] The others manage to find out anyway, and as Diamond observes, "[t]he methods of discovery were not very ingenious, and anyone who was so easily found out as St. Francis appears to have been cannot very well be described as having tried his utmost to conceal his wound."[55] Or again, immediately before it is made clear to us that St. Francis was unwilling to show the stigmata to another monk, Brother Ruffino, we are told that St. Francis granted to Brother Ruffino "all that he desired."[56] And yet hagiographies were not thought of as fictitious works.

What on earth is going on here? Diamond helpfully explains as follows:

> The writing of saints' lives, it has often been said, aims not so much at history as at edification. I have been suggesting that that is reflected in a characteristic use of language, distinct from that of ordinary historiography, or indeed of ordinary descriptions of things around us. The language of description is used, but without some of its normal ties: to consequences on the one hand, to evidence on the other. Hippolyte Delehaye compares hagiographers to poets, and more interestingly to painters. He asks us to think of
>
> > an old edition of the *Aeneid*; in accordance with the custom of his time the printer has prefaced it with an engraving representing Virgil. You do not hesitate for a moment, do you, to say that it is not a portrait? And nobody will take you to task for so lightly deciding a question of likeness, which calls for a comparison between the original and the representation. You for your part will not say that the man who wrote Virgil's name under a fanciful picture is a swindler. The artist was following the fashion of his time, which allowed conventional portraits.
>
> In the writing of saints' lives we have just such portraits, constructions of objects for contemplation; and if we think of words and phrases detached from their normal ties to evidence and consequences as linguistic 'surfaces', we may say that these writings are constructions from such surfaces: words without the body of their connections to the world.[57]

Notice now that there are two distinct postures we can adopt when critically evaluating hagiographical writings. On the one hand we might leave unquestioned the conventions of hagiography. In this case the only way the descriptions of the saints can be correct or incorrect is by being or failing to be in accord with those conventions. On the other hand, we might take up the

---

[54] *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assissi*, p. 163.
[55] Diamond, "Realism and the Realistic Spirit," p. 51.
[56] *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*, pp. 163-164.
[57] Diamond, "Realism and the Realistic Spirit," pp. 51-52.

stance of a contemporary historian, bracketing those conventions and treating the descriptions used in hagiographical accounts as carrying with them the same ties to evidence and consequences that they carry into other contexts. Having adopted this latter posture, we might ask questions like the following: of course it is appropriate according to the conventions of hagiography to describe Francis as having "tried his utmost" to hide his wounds from his fellow monks, but did he *really* try his utmost? And, it seems, we would have to conclude that he did not.

I think we do well to understand the objection as insisting that, when she invites us to explain how we can bridge super-gulfs, the underdetermination skeptic means to be inviting us to undertake an investigation analogous to that I have said a contemporary historian might take up with respect to the claims made by hagiographers: having suspended belief in the validity of all our inferential practices and in the truth of the beliefs to which they lead us, she wants us to consider the game of giving and asking for ethical reasons from sideways on, asking whether or not it is such that, if we play by the rules, we can expect to arrive at the truth.

Now: is that a compelling objection to what I have said? Is this enough to make intelligible the questions about super-gulfs on which the evolutionary skeptic's argument turns?

2.5.2. An Evolutionary Chimera

I don't think so. This is of course a correct description of the sort of thing underdetermination skeptics will *say* they want. The trouble is just that it's not clear whether or not there is in fact any such thing to want—whether we can actually make out the possibility of interrogating the rules of the game of giving and asking for ethical reasons in a way analogous to the historian's critical examination of the claims about saints made in hagiographies. I suspect that, like that "last interpretation" the platonist about rules takes it we need in order to stop the regress of interpretations, the investigation the evolutionary skeptic here invites us to undertake is nothing

more than a logical chimera.

As in the rule-following case, the evolutionary skeptic's confusion stems from a misguided attempt at combining two thoughts that, on their own, are perfectly innocuous. On the one hand, we have the idea of checking to see whether or not a measuring instrument is reliable. For instance, we might check the accuracy of a watch by comparing it against an atomic clock. On the other, we observe that, from time to time, we hold up for critical examination certain of our assumptions or certain aspects of our investigative practices that have previously been taken for granted. For instance, Einstein challenged the assumption that the length of an object is the same no matter how fast it moves, and Copernicus challenged the assumption that the sun revolves around the earth. In ethics, abolitionists challenged the assumption that the fact that a person has relatively dark skin entails that it is acceptable to treat them in ways that would otherwise not be appropriate—in particular, whether or not it is acceptable to enslave them.[58] The trouble arises when we start to think of our investigative practices as themselves measuring instruments of a sort. As soon as we do this, the possibility of checking to make sure a measuring instrument is reliable suggests to us the possibility of a sort of generalized version of the kinds of critical interrogation of our practices carried out by Einstein, Copernicus, and the abolitionists. It comes to seem to us that, just as we cannot take a take our watch's readings at face value if we do not know whether or not it accurately measures the passage of time, we cannot take our judgments for true unless we can ensure, via some such interrogation, that the investigative practice of which they are a part is, as a whole, reliable.

The trouble with this idea is that it fails to take into account a crucial feature of what we do when we check to see if a measuring device is accurate or critically examine our practices, namely

[58] In fact this common narrative of the abolitionist movement paints too rosy a picture. As Edward Baptist shows in his *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, most abolitionist sentiment was motivated by a desire on the part of northerners to free themselves of political domination by southern slaveholders. In reality, though some abolitionists do seem to have been motivated in the way I suggest here, they made up only a small fraction of the abolitionist movement.

that, when we do this, there is inevitably much that we leave unquestioned. When for example we check to see whether or not a particular watch or clock is accurate, we typically do so by checking it against another whose accuracy is not in doubt. And when the abolitionists raised the question whether or not it was acceptable to enslave dark-skinned people, they did not suspend belief as to whether or not it was permissible to enslave white people. Instead, they asked themselves *why* they thought it unacceptable to enslave white people and whether or not there was any reason to think this same set of considerations was not equally applicable to non-white people. In each case, the relevant question would have been impossible to answer otherwise. If it is not possible, even in principle, to accurately measure the passing of time, what am I supposed to compare my watch to in order to determine whether or not it accurately measures the passing of time? And if we do not take for granted that it would be wrong to enslave people in at least some circumstances, how am I supposed to decide whether or not it is wrong in *any* case? The things we take for granted tell us what it would *take* answer our questions, guidance about which is a sine qua non for any investigation.

When we attempt to treat our investigative practices as a whole as measuring devices, then, we attempt to carry out an investigation without any guidance as to how we are to carry it out. By design, this investigation is not supposed to take for granted *any part* of the practice being held up for examination. We are supposed to bracket all of that, asking not whether or not some particular conclusion is acceptable in light of some set of assumptions, but whether or not practice *as a whole* is such as to lead us to the truth. But if we have bracketed all of the assumptions and inferential practices we are wont to deploy in our efforts to discern the truth, how *else* are we supposed to do it? How are we to know what to call the truth? And how are we to decide whether or not our practices are reliable? How, more generally, are we supposed to carry out an investigation if we have effectively decided in advance that there is nothing that might count as evidence for or against any

particular conclusion? Can we even call we are doing an "an investigation" in that case? Or are we not rather simply considering one thing after another in an earnest way, perhaps with furrowed brows?

These considerations suggest that the very idea of vindicating or undermining our practices from sideways on is nothing more than a logical chimera, a realization that should lead us to wonder, in turn, whether or not we really are able to make sense of the possibility of the kind of error that exercises the skeptic. After all, if we cannot make sense of the investigation we allegedly need to but have so far failed to make, what sense is there to be made of the claim that we might be mistaken?

Given how close she comes to seeing it for what it is, it is notable that Street in particular got caught up in this fantasy at all. As we saw in chapter one, Street herself does not just grant but in fact emphasizes that reflection necessarily takes some things for granted as it holds others up for examination. Here I take it the point is exactly the one I have been making, that reflection cannot take place from sideways on or—less metaphorically—that there is just no such thing as reflection that does not take for granted the truth of at least some beliefs or the validity of at least some inferential practices. Of course, in the context of her argument, the point of Street's remark is a bit more restricted than this way of putting things suggests: she means to say that one cannot *justify* specific ethical claims from sideways on. But if reflection cannot help us *answer* skeptical challenges from sideways on, why think it enables us to *raise* them from there? If we cannot *justify* our claims without taking others for granted, why not conclude that you cannot *challenge* a claim's justificatory bona fides without doing so either, that, as Wittgenstein once put the point, "if you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything"?[59] That is to say: had Street followed through her own insight to its logical conclusion, she might have seen that her argument contains the mistake I have sought to bring out. For if the only questions we can even so much as make sense

[59] *On Certainty*, §115; cf. §450: "A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt."

of are those relatively local questions that invite us to bridge gulfs analogous to that confronted by the American tourist in Rome—questions that leave much of our practices in place while calling at most some of them into question—then there just *is* no undermining the legitimacy of our game by raising challenges to it from sideways on, as she hopes to.

2.5.3. Science and the View from Sideways On

There is an understandable tendency to think this cannot possibly be right, that we *must* be able to investigate our practices in this way, or—failing that—at least make *sense* of the idea. Part of what leads us to think this way, it seems to me, is a confused picture of scientific or, more generally, empirical inquiry, one that suggests it must be possible to take the view from sideways on in ethics because we do so elsewhere. For, the thought goes, is this not precisely what scientists do when, having developed some theory about how things work, they set out to test the theory, to determine whether or not things are in fact as it says they are? Do they not there set aside their preconceptions about the way things are and, holding them up to a neutral standard, see how they measure up, just as the evolutionary skeptic invites us to do when she in effect asks us whether or not it was *really* wrong of the judge to say what he did?

But as John McDowell has long emphasized, this understanding of the way verification by experience works is utterly confused.[60] For even when comparing their theories to the world, scientists do not suspend belief in *all* empirical claims and about the appropriateness of *all* inferential practices and justificatory standards. Were they to do *that*, no observations they made during the testing process could count as *evidence* for or against the theory in question, since to take certain facts as evidence for others would be to *fail* to bracket at least *one* aspect of the relevant epistemic practice. Indeed, for precisely that reason, they could not in that case even call what they are doing *testing* the

[60] See the passages from McDowell's "Critical Notice" and "Two Sorts of Naturalism" cited in note 52 above. It may also be fair to say that this is, in a way, the point of *Mind and World*.

theory: if no new discovery could possibly count either for or against the theory, it makes no sense to call whatever these "researchers"[61] are doing administering a test! If the results of experiments are to amount to *evidence* one way or the other, researchers must assume the validity of certain inferences—that, for example, the fact that a clock slowed by some amount while moving at such and such a speed relative to some other clock shows that we got the equations right. Researchers may also need to take for granted the truth of at least some empirical claims, such as that their eyesight is okay, or that their microscopes are in fine working order. It is for this reason that McDowell says that "the role of causation, in scientific thought's well-grounded conception of itself, does not rescue scientific thought from Neurath's boat."[62] Just like a*ll* inquiry, scientific inquiry is in this sense inescapably Neurathian.

To be clear, I do not mean to be espousing the view—attributed to Wittgenstein in some bad readings of *On Certainty*—that certain propositions are for some reason beyond question, as though certain questions were, so to speak, out of bounds, disallowed by the rules of the language game.[63] Under suitable circumstances, any proposition can come into question, though in some cases we may struggle to think of circumstances that would be suitable. And no intelligible question is off limits. That is to say: I do not here mean to be declaring, by fiat, that we just mustn't ask certain questions or entertain certain doubts. I only mean to be making observations about what it does and does not make sense to say. The whole problem with evolutionary skepticism is that it takes for granted that there is something we would need to be able to do if knowledge of objective ethical facts were possible but can't in fact do—namely, to climb outside our heads and vindicate our practices from sideways on.[64] I am not reiterating this line. I am suggesting, instead, that the skeptic has failed to give us any reason to agree with him that he has uncovered some question we have

[61] I put the term in quotation marks because its appropriateness here is questionable for the same reasons.
[62] "Two Sorts of Naturalism," p. 187.
[63] Alice Crary has ably criticized such interpretations of *On Certainty* in *Beyond Moral Judgment*, ch. 3.
[64] Cf. *Investigations* §374: "The great difficulty here is not to present the matter as if there were something one *couldn't* do."

failed to answer, a question to which the objectivity of ethical facts and the nature of reflection precludes an answer. For all he has said, we have so far not been given any reason to think we have failed in our duties: no such question has been uncovered.

2.6. The Upshot

In chapter one, we saw that according to Street, realists cannot make room for the possibility of moral knowledge and so cannot appeal to the corrective potential of reflection to explain their moral beliefs unless they can find a way to bridge the super-gulf that threatens their grip on the facts. But, I have just argued, there is reason to doubt that this claim of Street's even so much as makes sense. Now, what is the upshot of all this?

Because the implications are different for each of the two rejoinders that, I said in §§1.2.2-1.2.3, debunkers might deploy in defense of their arguments, I'll discuss each of those separately, beginning with the second.

2.6.1. Implications Regarding the Second Rejoinder

In short, the foregoing considerations suggest that Street's challenge to the possibility of knowledge of objective ethical facts is not well motivated. For, as we saw, the problem with the idea that reflection enables us to correct for the distorting influence of natural selection was supposed to be that, because the evidence available to us in reflection necessarily underdetermines the truth of the beliefs to which it lends support, any true beliefs to which reflection might lead us could not amount to knowledge, and as we are now in a position to see, it is just not clear how we are to understand this charge. Allow me to explain.

It's not hard to think of examples of the kind of thing Street has in mind, cases in which some epistemic agent's belief fails to amount to knowledge because the evidence on which his belief

is based underdetermines the truth of his belief with respect to some state of affairs that is incompatible with that he takes to obtain. We can see this, for example, in Alvin Goldman's famous false barn case, wherein Henry, while driving through a part of the countryside that, unbeknownst to him, is rife with papier-mâché facsimiles of barns, points to what as a matter of fact is a real barn and tells his young son "That's a barn."[65] The two relevant states of affairs in this case are (1) that there is a barn on the side of the road and (2) that the structure that looks like a barn is in fact a papier-mâché barn façade. Henry believes (1) obtains, but for all he knows, (2) might instead. Hence his belief does not amount to knowledge.

The trouble with Street's suggestion that, if realism is true, the truth of any beliefs at which we might arrive via reflection is underdetermined by our evidence is that it is just not clear what the relevant alternative states of affairs are that we are supposed to be incapable of ruling out. Again we can use the case from *Blood Meridian* to illustrate the point. Earlier we saw that it is possible to make sense of the suggestion that evolutionary influences might have misled us about the moral status of the judge's actions in the tent. Perhaps it is in fact the judge's own dark vision of the world that is correct, but because a different, less anti-social view better promotes cooperation among groups, evolutionary influences have pushed us to think otherwise. But as I said, this is not a suggestion reflection cannot touch. In fact I brought forward several considerations that seem to vindicate a kind of moral common sense as against the judge's view. If Street's point were just that evolutionary considerations sometimes give us reason to concern ourselves with the possibility that we have fallen into error, I would of course agree. But recall that it is precisely because it seems to be possible to lay to rest this and other, similar concerns that Street and like-minded skeptics want to say that this is *not* the kind of possibility in virtue of which reflection cannot help us to acquire knowledge of objective ethical facts. Just what kinds of possibilities they do have in mind, I have argued, remains

[65] Goldman, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," pp. 772-773.

unclear. Moreover, I have suggested, that is no accident, for the alleged possibilities on which they focus are a product of philosophical fantasy.

If I am right about this, Street has not in fact managed to identify an obstacle to the reflective acquisition of knowledge of objective ethical facts. Nor, consequently, can she be said to have given us any reason to doubt that realists might appeal to the potentially corrective influence of reflection on the content of our beliefs to explain why we form the beliefs we do.

This response may remind some readers of the so-called "Dogmatist" response to external world skepticism outlined by Jim Pryor.[66] According to this view, we are *prima facie* justified in taking things to be as they seem (a principle known as "phenomenal conservatism"). Importantly, the point is not that we are *always* justified in taking things to be as they seem; rather, Pryor says,

> This *prima facie* justification can be undermined or threatened if you gain positive empirical evidence that *you really are in a skeptical scenario*. (For instance, if a ticker tape appears at the bottom of your visual field with the words "You are a brain in a vat...") If you acquire evidence of that sort, then you'd have to find some non-question-begging way of ruling the skeptical hypothesis out, before you'd be *all things considered justified* in believing that things are as your experiences present them. In the standard case, though, when the *prima facie* justification you get from your experiences is not defeated or undermined, then it counts as all things considered justification, without your having to do this.[67]

The dogmatist claims that, fortunately, we have no positive evidence that any relevant skeptical scenario obtains. Similarly, it might be thought, my claim is that we are *prima facie* justified in taking things to be as we are wont to take them to be (ethically speaking), and since we have no reason to think any relevant skeptical scenario obtains, we are also all things considered justified in doing so.

Importantly, however, this is *not* my claim. For one thing, my emphasis on our ordinary ways of investigating and assessing ethical claims should not be taken as a commitment to an ethical analogue of phenomenal conservatism. My claim is that it makes no sense to wonder whether the investigative practices that partly constitute the game of giving and asking for reasons might lead us

[66] See Pryor, "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist."
[67] Ibid., pp. 537-538.

astray, not that we are *prima facie* justified in holding whichever ethical beliefs strike us as true. However things may stand with respect to the latter claim, nothing in my argument requires it. More importantly, though, where the dogmatist sees a possibility we have no reason to take to obtain, I do not see any possibility *at all*. My claim is not that we lack evidence that skeptical scenarios obtain, but that these alleged possibilities are not even so much as intelligible.

2.6.2. Implications Regarding the First Rejoinder

This brings us to the implications of the foregoing for the first rejoinder I canvassed for debunkers (see §1.2.2).

To begin with, it may be helpful to remind readers where that earlier discussion left off. Faced with the debunkers' claim that the best, complete explanation of why we make the ethical judgments we do does not presuppose their truth, I said, it might be suggested that it is not at all obvious that this is the best explanation on offer. Rather, I said, the best explanation would seem to be one that *does* presuppose the truth of our beliefs, at least in some cases. According to this alternative explanation, we form the beliefs we do, not simply because they follow from whatever beliefs we started with or because of the influences on our thinking of natural selection, our upbringing, or whatever, but because, having reflected on the issue, we have come to realize that these rather than any other beliefs we could form are *true*.

In response, we saw, debunkers might reply that this explanation is redundant. Inspired by Gilbert Harman, they might contend that, in fact, "[a]ll we need assume is that you have certain more or less well articulated moral principles that are reflected in the judgments you make, based on you moral sensibility."[68] In reply, non-skeptics might draw on Nicholas Sturgeon's well-known reply to Harman, suggesting that, when evaluated in the most straightforward way, the counterfactual

[68] Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, p. 7.

implied by Harman's argument—namely

> HARMAN'S COUNTERFACTUAL: we would hold the same ethical beliefs even if they were false—

is itself false, since there is good reason to think that the nearest possible worlds in which our present ethical beliefs are false are worlds in which we fail to hold them. However, I noted, there is room for those sympathetic to Harman's argument here to take issue with this response. For, they might note, Sturgeon's response works only if it is permissible for us to take for granted various basic ethical principles in evaluating the relevant counterfactual, since it is only by doing so that we can determine which is the closest possible world in which its antecedent is false. However, debunkers might say, it is the point of Harman's argument to rule that sort of thing out; that is, Harman's point is in effect that, even if we were *radically* mistaken about ethical matters—if in fact every single one of the fundamental ethical principles we are wont to rely one were false—we would still hold the very same ethical beliefs.

This is where we left the dialectic in chapter one. At that time, I noted that anti-skeptics have tried various strategies to respond to this line of thought but suggested that there is a deeper problem with this Harman-inspired defense of debunking arguments no one seems to have noticed. The argument of this chapter has put us in position to appreciate this deeper problem.

In effect, the problems here mirror those we saw in the under-determination case. There, the skeptic's "really" questions admit of a variety of interpretations on which they are perfectly intelligible and familiar sorts of questions. Yet the skeptic denies that any of these interpretations is correct. He insists, instead, that he is asking a deeper, more difficult question, one that can't be answered in the same way as these more familiar kinds of questions. In other words, I have said, the skeptic means to ask whether there is a super-gulf between our beliefs and the facts. The problem with this, I've argued, is just that there is no sense to be made of this suggestion. The appearance to the contrary can only be explained as a product of philosophical fantasy.

Similarly, I want to say, in the present case. Thus, as Sturgeon makes clear, there are various straightforward ways of taking the antecedent of HARMAN'S COUNTERFACTUAL and its more specific variants. If for example I want to know whether I would still believe it wrong of the boys in Harman's example acted wrongly even if they hadn't, it's not too hard to come up with examples of relatively similar actions they might have taken that wouldn't have been wrong. Supposing we hold fixed that what they did was set a cat on fire for fun, one way this might not have been wrong might be if cats were very different animals that were somehow immune to the harmful effects of fire. Perhaps they only regard it as a slight nuisance, akin to a mosquito bite, and respond to finding themselves on fire by doing some sort of amusing dance. Or if we're allowed to imagine them having performed a different act entirely—perhaps one that, though mischievous and perhaps bothersome to the victim, is not especially harmful—we might imagine them doing some prank calls. Obviously these are just two of many ways we might interpret the antecedent of the relevant counterfactual. What's important for our purposes is just that none of these interpretive possibilities is going to satisfy the skeptic or strike him as an accurate reflection of his intent. Instead, he will say, the scenario he has in mind is one in which the boys do exactly as they do, and cats are as they are, yet their act is not wrong. In *that* scenario, they want to say, we would still believe the boys acted wrongly.

My question is whether we can make any sense of this. I've mentioned a couple ways of taking the antecedent of the skeptic's conditional, just as before I canvassed a variety of ways we might take the question whether it was *really* wrong of the judge to act as he does in the *Blood Meridian* case. Here as there, though, the skeptic rejects these interpretations, claiming that they fail to get at what's really at issue. Asked for clarification, however, skeptics seem to have nothing helpful to say. They might say, for instance, that they are asking a "deeper" or "more fundamental" question, or that they inviting us to imagine that we are "radically" mistaken. But asked, for example,

how exactly we are to imagine that, not something similar, but the *very* act Harman mentions—*setting a cat on fire for fun!*—is not in fact wrong, they offer no guidance. It is thus left entirely unclear how we are to understand the alleged possibility the Harman-inspired defender of debunking arguments invites us to consider, and in which, he maintains, we would hold the same beliefs we do now.

In both cases, then, the debunkers' arguments ultimately rely on the same confused conception of ethical thought and talk—the same philosophical fantasy. They take themselves to be able to make sense of an allegedly deep kind of error possibility, one that is relevant to our thinking about the adequacy of the evidence available to us in ethical reflection and about the extent to which reflection is sensitive to the facts. But, I'm suggesting, there's no there there. When we take the time to look at the rags, to really interrogate the alleged possibilities that exercise the skeptic in the ways we would take to be necessary were they to come up in ordinary conversation, we find that all our attempts to get clear about what is being suggested come up short. To be sure, we can come up with some possibilities, but over and over again, we find that those are rejected by the skeptic as not really getting to the heart of the matter. As for what would—well, that remains a mystery. And so, we are forced to conclude, it is just not clear what sense there is to be made of the skeptics words, either of the under-determination skeptic's really questions or of HARMAN'S COUNTERFACTUAL and its variants.

2.6.3. The Role of Simple Realism

By now, some readers will have wondered about the role that is supposed to be played in this chapter's argument by simple realism, which I have hardly mentioned. In particular, they might wonder whether this part of my response to debunkers is simply supposed to be a *consequence* of simple realism. In fact it is not, and so very briefly, I want to explain why.

Certainly this response is *consistent* with simple realism. Moreover, given that the form of

simple realism I have endorsed holds that the game of giving and asking for ethical reasons is governed by constitutive rules that fix the meanings of our terms and the extensions of our concepts, I do think this is the sort of response simple realism suggests. Put in terms that make the implication more explicit, the trouble with questions that ask after super-gulfs, on the simple realist's view, is that they ask whether or not some term applies even when the conditions specified in the rules that govern that term's use are satisfied. For that reason, there can simply be no question whether the term applies; *given that the term means what it does*, it must apply, so for someone to ask whether it does suggests, if anything, that they do not understand how to use the relevant word.

Even so, my argument that super-gulfs are unintelligible should not be thought to *rest* on my commitment to simple realism—I am not saying that, since simple realism is true, super-gulfs are unintelligible. Since I have not really *argued* for simple realism at all, that would make the argument of this chapter exceptionally weak. If anything, the relationship goes the other way around. That is, I think of the ordinary language argument of this chapter as lending support to the version of simple realism I endorsed in the previous chapter, in particular to its claim that moral discourse is governed by constitutive semantic-conceptual rules. If sound, my arguments in this chapter support that claim by showing how we can run up against the bounds of sense in exactly the way simple realism would predict.

2.7. Two Objections

This completes my response to the first two ways of defending debunking arguments canvassed in chapter one. Before moving on to discuss the third rejoinder I discussed there, I want to take up two objections to my claim that claims and questions about super-gulfs are unintelligible.

2.7.1. Super-gulfs and Radical Skeptical Scenarios

The first objection appeals to certain radical skeptical scenarios that make problems for our knowledge of empirical facts. As I explained in §2.5.2, I agree with John McDowell that it is a mistake to think of the process of confirming and disconfirming scientific hypotheses through experiments and observation as one of bridging super-gulfs between our beliefs and the facts. But even someone willing to grant me that much might protest that it does not follow that we cannot make sense of the suggestion that super-gulfs might open up between our beliefs and the empirical facts. If I want to argue for that claim, it will be said, I also need to discuss how my view about the intelligibility of super-gulfs bears on questions about radical skeptical scenarios, since it might be thought that such scenarios, if intelligible, help us to make sense of the possibility that super-gulfs might open up between our empirical beliefs and the facts.

Consider, for example the possibility that, unbeknownst to me, I am but a brain in a vat being controlled by clever scientists who want me to think I am writing about moral epistemology. Though certainly worrisome, this scenario does not seem to be unintelligible. (If it were, it's hard to see how *The Matrix* could have been so popular!) If that's right, we can easily make sense of the suggestion that I might not be writing about moral epistemology right now even though there is every indication that I am: I might just be an envatted brain being manipulated by scientists to *think* I'm doing that! But, the worry goes, isn't that just to say that there might be a super-gulf between my empirical beliefs and the facts?

In fact it's not, for there is a crucial difference between the suggestion that I might be a brain in a vat and that on which the challenge to the possibility of ethical knowledge I take up depends. In both the ethical and the empirical case, the trouble is supposed to be that the truth of my beliefs is under-determined, in the sense that the evidence available to me does not rule out the possibility that some radical skeptical scenario obtains. But the *reason* this is supposed to be so is importantly

different in the ethical case than in the empirical case. In the ethical case, the under-determination is not supposed to stem from any contingent epistemic misfortune we've suffered but from the nature of reflection itself. Given that reflection cannot but take some things for granted as it calls others into question, the thought goes, we cannot possibly hold up for examination reflection's own credentials; nor, *a fortiori*, can we rule out the possibility that we're wildly mistaken. By contrast, the difficulty in the empirical case *does* stem from contingent epistemic misfortune. For suppose that it were written into all of the simulation software that envatted brains be told they are envatted, or that, out of generosity or because it was the law, all the scientists doing the envatting informed the envatted of their plight. In that case it would be easy to tell if you were a normal person going about in the world or an envatted brain being made to think you are.

Now, if what we care about is answering the skeptic about the external world, it of course makes no difference that *some* brain-in-a-vat scenarios don't preclude the possibility that envatted brains might come to know that they are envatted; what matters, rather, is that some *do*. But it is not with a view to answering such skeptics that I have highlighted possibilities such as that benevolent scientists might inform us that we're envatted. Rather, I have done so in order to bring out a crucial difference between the threat these scenarios pose to our knowledge of the external world and the alleged threat to the possibility of knowledge of objective ethical facts with which I am concerned. *That* threat depends on the thought that our entire investigative practice might be wildly unreliable. The trouble is not that we lack some evidence the standards of our practice dictate that we need; it's that, even if we had all the evidence those standards deem necessary, it wouldn't be enough. In the brain-in-a-vat case, however, it is precisely the first possibility that's relevant. Sure, we may not be able to know whether or not we're brains in vats, but only because the scientists won't tell us or whatever—only, that is, because for contingent reasons we lack evidence that we all take to be and routinely treat as relevant to the question. My point in denying the intelligibility of super-gulfs is that

there is no sense to be made of the suggestion at issue in the ethical case. That claim neither depends on nor entails that there is anything similarly amiss in the kinds of worries that motivate external world skepticism.

Here is another way of putting the point. The idea of a super-gulf is that of a gulf between our beliefs and the facts that might yawn even after we've done everything our practice demands in terms of gathering relevant evidence, checking for biases on our part, etc. It is a possibility of error that cannot be eliminated by the normal methods—i.e., by playing the game of giving and asking for reasons. Run-of-the-mill belief-fact gulfs, by contrast, can be eliminated in the normal ways. Though it is certainly unusual in some ways, I have been urging, the belief-fact gulf made salient by the possibility that we are envatted is of the latter, run-of-the-mill sort. If we cannot bridge the gulf that possibility makes salient, that is only because limitations to which we are contingently subject prevent us from gathering the evidence our practice demands.

2.7.2. Metaphysics and Super-gulfs

Another source of resistance to my suggestion that we cannot make sense of claims and questions about super-gulfs stems from metaphysical considerations. I have surveyed a variety of ways of taking the "really?" questions on which, I said, the underdetermination-based challenge for realism turns, namely: sure, all of what we are wont to treat as evidence *appears* to suggest that P, and nothing *appears* to speak against P, but is it *really* the case that P? I have suggested that, while there are various ways of making sense of this or similar questions, none of them manages to say what Street and like-minded skeptics want—or *think* they want—them to say. Now, obviously, this sort of argument can only be as compelling as its inventory of possible versions of the relevant question or claim is complete, since it will be inappropriate to conclude that there is no suitable way of taking the relevant words before we have surveyed all the relevant ways of taking them. Trouble is, some

readers might think that I have jumped the gun in exactly this way. For, they will say, there is a kind of "really" question I have so far failed to consider but need to, one that means to ask about metaphysics. That is, it wants to ask: sure, it seems that P, but P has such and such metaphysical presuppositions, and you haven't yet considered whether or not the relevant metaphysical states of affairs obtain. If we can indeed make sense of such questions, then it would seem that we can make sense of the skeptic's appeal to super-gulfs and invocation of the view from sideways on after all.[69]

This way of thinking is, I think, obligatory for explanatory realists, who maintain that it is the fact that, metaphysically speaking, things are thus and so that *explains* why our ethical claims are true and admit of objective truth. Similarly for error theorists, who maintain that we ought not to believe any moral propositions because they all have false metaphysical presuppositions (since, according to them, there are no moral properties, relations, or facts). Proponents of these positions are committed to thinking it possible that we might somehow step outside the language-game to check whether metaphysical reality truly is as our language represents it; according to them, it is on the basis of such an investigation that we are licensed to conclude, in the realist's case, that things are as they seem or, in the error theorist's case, that they are not.

As a simple realist, I reject this metaphysics first approach, suggesting instead that the only way to learn about the metaphysics of morals is to start by checking to see which moves are and which aren't allowed by the rules of giving and asking for ethical reasons, basing any conclusions we draw about the metaphysics on the results of that investigation. So understood, no claims the metaphysics of morals could support the radically revisionary claims made by explanatory realists, according to whom we might be profoundly mistaken about the character of moral reality in spite of our best efforts, and despite the fact that all of our evidence seems to suggest otherwise; similarly for claims made by error theorists, according to whom we are so mistaken. For on the simple realist's

[69] I thank Steven Gross and Richard Bett for pressing me to think more about this objection.

view, the metaphysics of morals are beholden to the rules of the game rather than the other way around.

Still, the fact that this objection is at odds with simple realism does nothing to show that the objection is mistaken. To do that, I need to explain why I doubt any appeal to the metaphysics of morals can underwrite the intelligibility of super-gulfs and the view from sideways on.

Certainly it is true that, if we can make sense of explanatory realism and error theory, we can make sense of super-gulfs after all. I think that has to be right. But though I accept the conditional, I would tollens the objector's ponens. That is, I believe the right conclusion to draw from this conditional is, not that, since explanatory realism and error theory are intelligible, so is the suggestion that super-gulfs might yawn between our beliefs and the facts, but that, since we can't make sense of that suggestion, we can't make sense of explanatory realism or error theory either. These views are thus only *apparently* incompatible with my own. In fact, they are not even so much as intelligible, since they entail that we are liable to a kind of error in ethical thinking of which, I have argued, there is simply no sense to be made.

Many will find this implausible. Indeed, in the case of error theory in particular, several philosophers have recently taken the fact that it has similar implications to count decisively against Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's moral fixed points view.[70] I would urge these readers to think a bit more about how exactly the appeal to metaphysical considerations is supposed to underwrite the intelligibility of claims and questions about super-gulfs. I take it the thought here is motivated by the idea that ethical inquiry is something like scientific inquiry—that ethics is what McDowell once called a "para-science."[71] For as in scientific inquiry, the thought goes, in ethics we are concerned to learn how things stand regarding properties or relations that are there anyway, regardless of what we

[70] See Evers and Streumer, "Are the Moral Fixed Points Conceptual Truths?"; Ingram, "The Moral Fixed Points: Reply to Cuneo and Shafer-Landau"; Kyriacou, "Moral Fixed Points and Conceptual Deficiency: Reply to Ingram (2015)"; and Ingram, "Are Moral Error Theorists Intellectually Vicious?"

[71] McDowell characterizes Mackie's stalking horse this way at "Two Sorts of Naturalism," p. 186

think or do. But I doubt this comparison can help the defender of super-gulfs. For as I argued in §2.5.2, the fact that, in science, we hold entire theories up for examination does not entail that we there consider whether or not there is a super-gulf between our beliefs and the facts. And as I argued in §2.7.1, the same is true regarding radical skeptical scenarios that make problems for our knowledge of empirical facts. While I have been willing to grant that at least some such scenarios are perfectly intelligible, I argued that this fact does not entail that we can make sense of the possibility that there is a super-gulf between our empirical beliefs and the facts because these skeptical scenarios are relevantly different from those invoked by the underdetermination skeptic in ethics (such as MORAL INVERSION). If I'm right on these points, then it's not clear how the view of ethics as para-science is supposed to underwrite the intelligibility of claims and questions about super-gulfs.

Of course, not everyone will find these considerations persuasive. At this point, I am not sure there is anything more I can say here to convince readers like this. Even so, I want to emphasize, my arguments have something to offer them. For even then, my arguments suggest that there is a way of endorsing the realist's characteristic claim about the objectivity of ethics without making it impossible to respond to Harman-inspired and underdetermination-based defenses of evolutionary debunking arguments. They thereby invite the question why we should care about the more radical kind of mind-independence endorsed by the explanatory realist and the error theorist. If we can respond to debunkers by denying the possibility that super-gulfs might open up between our beliefs and the facts without denying objectivity of ethics, why should we even so much as *want* to make room for that (alleged) possibility? After all, admitting it looks likely to bring nothing but trouble.[72]

[72] Thanks to Steven Gross for suggesting I consider a response along these lines.

2.8. Conclusion: The Beginning

Such, then, are the essentials of my response to the underdetermination-based argument I attributed to Street. As we saw, the rule-following skeptic's argument that a regress of interpretations threatens our attempts to suss out the meanings of words rests on the confused thought that, in order to understand each other, we would need to bridge super-gulfs between words and their meanings. Just so, I've argued in this chapter, Street's argument that realism precludes the possibility that we might come to know the facts in ethics via reflection and thereby sort the wheat from the evolutionary chaff rests on the confused, pseudo-questions about how we might bridge super-gulfs between our beliefs and the ethical facts. Moreover, I said, basically the same is true of the alternative, Harman-inspired defense of debunking arguments. In all of these cases, once we see our way through the fantasy by carefully attending to the rags and noting the ways our words send us in pursuit of chimeras, the arguments fall apart like houses of cards.[73]

There is a perfectly understandable temptation, when thinking about these issues, to think that this cannot be right, to think that the skeptic's words are obviously intelligible. Indeed, not only is it easy to be *taken in* by philosophical fantasy, it can also be hard to free oneself. It was presumably to make this point that, shortly before his death, and after he had been wrestling with Moore's attempt to demonstrate the existence of the external world for several weeks, Wittgenstein penned the following short remark:

> It is so hard to find the *beginning*. Or better: it is hard to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back.[74]

Wittgenstein is here thinking about what it looks like to come to know some empirical fact, or to justify an empirical claim—issues very close to those with which I have been concerned in this chapter. Here too, he thinks, we are liable to be misled in the same way as are Street and others who

[73] Cf. *Investigations* §118.
[74] *On Certainty*, §471 (translation modified).

have taken up these issues. We are liable to get caught up in fantasy and go off in pursuit of chimeras, thinking that there is some crucial question yet to be answered when, in fact, all that needs to be said has already been said.[75] As Samuel L. Jackson's character, Jules, says in *Pulp Fiction*, the path of the righteous is beset on all sides by iniquities.

Yet, I have urged, we do well not to give in to temptation. For in this case, uncritically accepting that things are as they seem can only deepen our philosophical difficulties. Instead we must carefully attend to the language game—inspecting the rags to get clearer about what we should say when, all the while keeping our heads in the game of giving and asking for ethical reasons so as to bring ourselves around, over and over again, as many times as necessary, to the simple but remarkably difficult realization that, try as we might to trace the chains of justification further back, we are stuck right where we are.[76] Only by doing that can we come to be content to conclude our inquiry at the beginning, wondering at the fact that we ever thought there was any further to go.

[75] Cf. *Zettel* §314.
[76] Cf. *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, pt. VI, §31.

3

Making Your Own Epistemic Luck

In chapter one, I outlined three rejoinders debunkers might offer to the reflection-centered response to debunking arguments I favor. According to the first, an explanation of our moral beliefs that appeals to our capacity to know moral reality by way of reflection is redundant, since we can explain our beliefs just as well if we instead appeal only to our antecedent views and moral sensibilities. According to the second, if realism is true, we lack the capacity to acquire moral knowledge through reflection, since in that case, the evidence available to us in ethical reflection necessarily underdetermines the truth of our beliefs. The third rejoinder, I said, is in fact better understood as two distinct objections, Benacerraf's Challenge and Field's Challenge. Benacerraf's Challenge contends that there is a causal or explanatory condition on knowledge that our beliefs cannot satisfy if realism is true; Field's Challenge contends that realists cannot adequately explain how we could be reliable about ethical matters. Both have the effect of problematizing my appeal to our capacity to acquire moral knowledge through reflection.

In the previous chapter, I responded to these first two rejoinders, drawing on Wittgenstein's

rule-following considerations to suggest that that each of them rests on a mistaken view about the kinds of errors to which we can intelligibly take ourselves to be liable in ethical reflection. In this chapter, I respond to Benacerraf's Challenge and Field's Challenge. I begin, in §§3.1-2, with a general discussion of what it means for a belief to be accidentally true. Here I in effect agree with Benacerraf; in particular, I argue that we do well to follow Masahiro Yamada, Kieran Setiya, and David Faraci in understanding the no accident condition on knowledge in explanatory rather than modal terms. However, I also argue, not all explanatory connection between our beliefs and the facts are such as to rule out the possibility of non-accidentally true beliefs, including those explanatory connections discussed or endorsed by Yamada, Setiya, and proponents of so-called third-factor responses to debunking arguments. In §3.3, I accordingly propose and defend a novel, teleological account that both remedies the shortcomings of these proposals and, thereby, answers Benacerraf's Challenge. According this account, which I call GETTING IT RIGHT ON PURPOSE, it will be no accident that my ethical beliefs are true, when they are, so long as I judge that P only if, and because, (it is true that) P. Finally, in §3.4, I take up Field's Challenge, drawing on Amie Thomasson's work in modal epistemology to suggest that, in contrast to explanatory realists, about whom Field may well be correct, simple realists can easily explain our reliability in ethics.

3.1. Against Modal Accounts

Since Edmund Gettier pointed out that accidentally true belief is not knowledge, many writers have attempted to say what it would take for it to be no accident that a belief is true. Some such writers, such as Peter Unger, have been content to treat the notion of accidental truth as primitive and not requiring further explication.[1] Others have noted that the notion of accidental truth itself admits of a variety of different interpretations. Moreover, these philosophers have noted, these differences

[1] See Unger, "An Analysis of Factual Knowledge."

matter, since different interpretations of accidental truth have different implications for our understanding of when someone deserves to be credited with knowledge.

I believe this latter group of authors is correct: the first step in thinking about when it is an accident that some belief is true and why such beliefs cannot count as knowledge is to consider what accidental truth amounts to in the first place. In this first section, I consider two popular modal accounts. Despite having garnered a good deal of support in the literature, I will argue, both are problematic, and for similar reasons.

3.1.1. Sensitivity or Tracking

According to one widely held view, we should understand the no accident condition on knowledge in terms of sensitivity or tracking. That is,

> SENSITIVITY: it is no accident that S's belief that P is true iff S would not believe that P if it were not the case that P.

It's not hard to see why many have found this account of accidental truth appealing. After all, there certainly are some cases of accidentally true belief regarding which SENSITIVITY not only gives the right result but offers a plausible explanation of the fact that the truth of the belief in question is a mere accident. Suppose, for example, that I'm trying to decide whether or not it is likely to rain this afternoon. (Perhaps I am about to go out and need to decide whether or not to bring my galoshes.) I might do that by rolling dice (odd numbers indicate rain, evens no rain). Going about things that way, it's possible that I'll get lucky and end up believing truly that rain is unlikely. If I were to do so, however, I wouldn't *know* that rain is unlikely. For given that rolling dice is an insensitive belief-forming process, it would be an accident that my belief about the likelihood of rain is true.

Nevertheless, SENSITIVITY is subject to a variety of counterexamples. Consider, for example, the following case:

> JIM: Jim's cognitive faculties and methods are such that, under normal conditions, they

> would be wildly unreliable. Jim knows this and has no reason to think that conditions are abnormal, yet he persists in forming beliefs in his usual way. Despite all this, Jim's belief that P is sensitive solely because some powerful demon is prepared to intervene to ensure that he does not believe that P when P is false.[2]

Jim's belief-forming methods are sensitive, and in an important sense their sensitivity is not just a matter of luck, since it is the consequence of deliberate actions on the part of a demon. Nevertheless, given that Jim himself is not *responsible* for the sensitivity of his methods or the truth of his beliefs, it seems right to say it is an accident that his beliefs are true.

JIM thus suggests that sensitivity does not suffice for non-accidentally true belief. Other cases show that sensitivity is not necessary either. Consider, for example, the following case from Jonathan Vogel:

> URANIUM: Roger places a piece of uranium on a photographic plate, and discovers that the plate has become fogged. He repeats the experiment many times. Before he inspects it, Roger concludes, by induction, that the newly exposed plate is now fogged. It is.[3]

Roger's belief that the plate is fogged is *not* sensitive: he would believe it was fogged even if it weren't. Nor, quite generally, is induction a sensitive belief-forming method. Nevertheless, it is hardly an accident that Roger's belief about the plate is true. Sensitivity, then, is not just insufficient but unnecessary for non-accidental truth.

There is another lesson we can draw from URANIUM. Few philosophers have thought non-accidentally true belief sufficient for knowledge,[4] but it is almost universally thought necessary. If, then, the no accident condition on knowledge is to be understood in terms of sensitivity, sensitivity would itself have to be a necessary condition of knowledge: S knows that P only if S would not believe that P were it not the case that P. But as URANIUM shows, it is not plausible that sensitivity is necessary for knowledge, since if it were, there could be no knowledge by induction.

---

[2] Adapted from Schafer, "Knowledge and Two Forms of Non-Accidental Truth," p. 381.
[3] Adapted from Vogel, "The Enduring Trouble with Tracking," p. 131. Vogel's article also contains copious other counterexamples to SENSITIVITY.
[4] See again Unger, "An Analysis of Factual Knowledge" and Yamada, "Getting it Right by Accident."

It would seem, then, that there is ample reason to reject SENSITIVITY as an account of the no accident condition on knowledge. But might there be some other way to capture this condition in modal terms?

3.1.2. Safety

Indeed there is. Recently, several philosophers, most prominently Duncan Pritchard and Timothy Williamson,[5] have suggested that the no accident condition on knowledge is best understood in terms of safety: it is no accident that my belief that P is true if I could not easily have been wrong about P. In other words:

> SAFETY: it is no accident that S's belief that P is true iff, in most nearby worlds in which S believes that P, it is the case that P.[6]

SAFETY is not without its attractions. For as with SENSITIVITY, there are cases of accidentally true belief regarding which SAFETY both gives the right result and offers a plausible explanation of the fact that the truth of the belief in question is a mere accident. Suppose, for instance, that having read Pascal, I become convinced that belief in God and the afterlife has a much higher expected utility than atheism and so become a Christian. Suppose too that God and the afterlife in fact exist. My beliefs would then be true, but only accidentally so. Why? Plausibly, the explanation has to do with safety: forming beliefs with a view to maximizing expected utility is not a reliable belief-forming method, so beliefs formed in that way are unsafe. Nevertheless, I will argue, safety is neither sufficient nor necessary for non-accidental truth. Nor, moreover, is it plausibly necessary for knowledge.

Cases abound in which safety is insufficient for non-accidentally true belief. Consider, for

[5] See Pritchard, *Epistemic Luck* and Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*.
[6] This formulation is closer to Pritchard's than to Williamson's. The latter formulates the condition in terms of a method: when S knows that P, she knows it on the basis of a method, M, whose output could not easily have been false. Except where noted below, this difference is not relevant for my purposes.

example, the case of Etienne:

> ETIENNE: The crown prince, Etienne—purely out of a deep sense of arrogance—believes that he is the strongest boy of his age in Paris. As a matter of fact, his belief is correct, but solely because his father has decreed that no stronger boy should be allowed to live in the city—a decree that the king's secret police are extremely efficient at carrying out.[7]

His father's secret police force makes sure that Etienne's belief about his relative strength is safe: so long as they remain vigilant, the young prince could not easily be mistaken on that point. Still, it's an accident that Etienne's belief is true. The method he uses—arrogantly believing oneself to be the best, whether or not one has any evidence for that assessment—is typically not going to be reliable. Moreover, its reliability in Etienne's case in particular is not *due* to anything *he did*. He does not choose this method for the sake of its reliability. Nor is he himself responsible for the actions of the secret police, actions without which Etienne's method would presumably be wildly unreliable. Nor, we can suppose, is he even aware of their actions. In a real and important sense, then, both the reliability of Etienne's method and, consequently, the truth of the beliefs he forms thereby, are purely a matter of luck.

Two further cases suggest the same conclusion. Consider first the case of Elsa:

> DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY: Although Elsa's ethical beliefs are reliably true, her reliability is irrelevant to her choice of belief-forming method. Instead, Elsa simply believes whatever it feels good to believe, refusing to believe undesirable states of affairs obtain regardless of the evidence presented to her. Moreover, she does so because everyone in her family and community does the same, and because they criticized her as a child whenever she tried to do things differently. Using this method, Elsa comes to believe, truly, that it is permissible to lie to ICE agents when they come asking after your undocumented neighbor, who would be tortured were he forced to return to his home country. For as it happens, she was taught from a young age that all immigration enforcement officials should be thwarted where possible; as a result, she is inclined to lie and would feel bad if she were to tell the truth.[8]

Given that her method is reliable and that she could not easily have used a different one, Elsa's belief would seem to be safe. Yet as with Etienne, neither the reliability of her method nor the truth

[7] This case is taken from Karl Schafer, "Knowledge and Two Faces of Non-accidental Truth," p. 384.
[8] Inspired by Dan Korman and Dustin Locke's example with Jack and the Martians in their forthcoming, §7.

of the belief to which it leads her are the result of anything Elsa herself does, since she adopts and uses the method she does for reasons utterly unrelated to its reliability. Consequently, the fact that she ends up forming a true belief is no more than a piece of good epistemic luck.

Consider next COIN FLIP:

> COIN FLIP: Let P be some necessarily true proposition, and suppose that I decide whether or not to believe that P on the basis of a coin flip: I will believe that P if it comes up heads but remain agnostic otherwise. Suppose, moreover, that I chose to use this method on a whim: I like flipping coins and prefer it to reasoning about what to believe. The coin comes up heads, so I believe that P.[9]

Since P is necessarily true, this method could not easily lead me to form a false belief, so my belief is safe. And yet it's an accident that my belief is true. My choice of this method has nothing to do with its reliability. Nor can I claim responsibility for the truth of my belief: for all I know, P is necessarily false! As in the other cases mentioned, then, it's just an accident that I wind up with a true belief.

Safety, then, is not sufficient for non-accidental truth. Is it necessary? The following case suggests not:

> COUNTERFACTUAL DECEPTION: Unbeknownst to me, you have planned an elaborate illusion in which it will look to me as though I am wearing my watch when in fact you have secretly swiped it away. You are prevented at the final moment, by some bizarre piece of bad luck. Just then it occurs to me that I might have forgotten to put on my watch that morning. I pull back my sleeve and am pleased to find that I haven't.[10]

My belief here is unsafe, since there are nearby worlds in which your plan succeeds and I form a false belief. But is it an accident that I am right about whether or not I forgot to put on my watch this morning? Well, why should it be? After all, you did not succeed in deceiving me, and I have no reason to suspect you might have. Nor, we can suppose, do I have any more general reason to suspect my vision unreliable. The right conclusion to draw is, not that my belief is accidentally true,

---

[9] Adapted from Setiya, *Knowing Right from Wrong*, pp. 90-91 (cf. Yamada, "Getting It Right By Accident," p. 88). As Setiya notes, though Pritchard's seems to be, Williamson's version of the safety condition is not vulnerable to this particular counterexample.

[10] Slightly modified from Setiya, *Knowing Right from Wrong*, p. 90.

but that safety is not necessary for non-accidentally true belief.[11]

As with URANIUM in §1.1 above, COUNTERFACTUAL DECEPTION gives us another reason to doubt SAFETY. Non-accidentally true belief is necessary for knowledge, so if SAFETY were true, I could know that P only if my belief that P were safe. But in COUNTERFACTUAL DECEPTION, I know that I didn't forget my watch despite the fact that this belief is unsafe. Like SENSITIVITY, SAFETY is false.

3.2. The Explanatory Approach

The failure of these modal accounts of non-accidental truth suggests we would do well to take a different tack. The aim of this section is to motivate and defend a version of what is in my view the most promising alternative on offer in the literature. Very roughly, the ideas is that, when S knows that P, there is an *explanatory connection* between S's belief that P and the fact that P;[12] as we will see, however, this rough characterization is inadequate as stated and will need to be refined in several ways.

I begin, in §4.2.1, by laying out several types of explanatory connection between our beliefs and the facts that have been explored in the literature and go on, in §4.2.2, to suggest that all of these are consistent with the possibility that our beliefs are only accidentally true. Finally, in §4.2.3, I defend a novel explanatory account of the no-accident condition on knowledge that explicitly rules out accounts that are problematic in the ways I bring out in §4.2.2.

[11] Cf. the story of Garrett and Lucy discussed by Yamada at "Getting It Right by Accident," p. 80.
[12] Versions of this view have been defended by Masahiro Yamada, Kieran Setiya, Matt Lutz, and David Faraci. See Yamada, "Getting It Right by Accident"; Setiya, *Knowing Right from Wrong*, chs. 3-4; Lutz, "The Reliability Challenge in Moral Epistemology"; and Faraci, "Groundwork for an Explanationist Account of Epistemic Coincidence."

3.2.1. Varieties of Explanatory Connections

The version of the explanatory approach that has been most widely-discussed in connection with debunking arguments holds that there is some so-called "third factor" that explains both why we hold the beliefs we do and why they are true. On David Enoch's view, for instance, this third factor is the fact that survival is good; he explains:

> Assume that survival or reproductive success (or whatever else evolution "aims" at) is at least somewhat good. […]
>
> Selective forces have shaped our normative judgments and beliefs, with the "aim" of survival or reproductive success in mind (so to speak). But given that these are by and large good aims – aims that normative truths recommend – our normative beliefs have developed to be at least somewhat in line with the normative truths. Perhaps somewhat ironically – because Street thinks evolutionary considerations serve to ground the epistemological challenge to realism – evolutionary considerations can help the realist cope with the challenge. Given that the evolutionary "aim" is good, the fact that our normative beliefs have been shaped by selective forces renders it far *less* mysterious that our normative beliefs are somewhat in line with the normative truths. This is so, then, neither because the normative truths are a function of our normative beliefs, nor because our normative beliefs causally track the normative truths, but because our normative beliefs have been shaped by selective pressures towards ends that are in fact – and quite independently – of value. The connection between evolutionary forces and value – the fact that survival is good – is what explains the correlation between the response-independent normative truths and our selected-for normative beliefs. The fact that (roughly speaking) survival is good pre-establishes the harmony between the normative truths and our normative beliefs.[13]

To my knowledge, no one who favors an account like this has put it forward *as* an account of the possibility of non-accidentally true belief. Instead, they are typically put forward in an attempt to answer Field's Challenge by explaining our reliability in ethics. Still, it's not hard to see how the argument would go. Since, a proponent of some such account might say, some third factor explains both why I hold the beliefs I do and why they are true, there is an indirect explanatory connection between my beliefs and that facts, and it is therefore no accident that my beliefs are true.

Consider next the approach favored by Kieran Setiya. Setiya frames his discussion of the possibility of non-accidentally true belief in terms of how our beliefs can satisfy a condition he calls K:

[13] Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, p. 168.

> K: When S knows that P, she knows it by a reliable method, and it is no accident that her method is reliable,[14]

where "it is no accident that S's method, *m*, is reliable iff there is an explanatory connection between the reliability of *m* and S's use thereof: either S uses *m because m* is reliable or that *m* is reliable *because* S uses *m*."[15] Theists, Setiya notes, might appeal to God to explain how ethical beliefs satisfy K, suggesting that God, who knows the truth, creates at least some of us such that our inferential dispositions are reliable.[16] However, Setiya argues, non-theists will find themselves unable to show that there is an explanatory connection between the relevant conjuncts unless it takes the form of what he calls a "constitutive connection" between the facts in ethics and our attitudes,[17] where "a constitutive account of *x* is an account of its nature, or what it is to be that thing: in Aristotelian terms, its essence or formal cause. A constitutive explanation of *p* and *q* is one in which *p* follows from *q* together with truths of this kind."[18] Consider, for example, BENEFIT:

> BENEFIT: For *x* to be good for or benefit S is for S to desire to desire *x*.

This constitutive account of benefit makes possible a constitutive explanation of the conjunction, I desire to desire opportunities to listen to Mozart and listening to Mozart would be good for me. Given BENEFIT, the first conjunct *explains* the second: listening to Mozart would be good for me *because* I desire to desire opportunities to do so.

Setiya considers several candidate constitutive accounts, concluding that some, like

> EXTERNALISM: part of what it is to have the concept of ethical virtue is to be such that one's method for identifying traits as virtues is sufficiently reliable,[19]

predict more convergence in ethical beliefs than we observe,[20] while others, like

---

[14] *Knowing Right from Wrong*, p. 96.
[15] Ibid., pp. 97-9.
[16] Ibid., p. 114. In fact it's not clear that this suggestion gets us very far, even setting aside the question of God's existence; after all, one might wonder, how does God himself manage to form non-accidentally true beliefs?
[17] Ibid., pp. 111-115.
[18] Ibid., p. 98.
[19] Ibid., p. 118.
[20] Ibid., pp. 120-122.

> SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM: for a trait to be a virtue is for the members of one's conceptual or linguistic community to believe that it is a virtue,[21]

preclude the possibility that entire communities might go astray.[22] In the end, he settles on two possibilities between which he declines to choose, NATURAL EXTERNALISM and NATURAL CONSTRUCTIVISM:

> NATURAL EXTERNALISM: Part of what it is to have the concept of ethical virtue is to belong to a life form whose method for identifying traits as virtues is sufficiently reliable.[23]
>
> NATURAL CONSTRUCTIVISM: For a trait to be a virtue is for creatures of one's life form to believe that it is a virtue.[24]

If either NATURAL EXTERNALISM or NATURAL CONSTRUCTIVISM is true, it is at least possible that there is an explanatory connection between my use of some method to form beliefs about virtue and its reliability. If NATURAL EXTERNALISM is true, the reference of ethical concepts is fixed by the method, *m*, that human beings by nature use in such a way that *m* is guaranteed to be reliable. If NATURAL CONSTRUCTIVISM is true, facts about human virtue are fixed by the method human beings use to identify virtues, so the fact that human beings use some method, *m*, for that purpose entails that *m* is reliable. Either way, there is an explanatory connection between the fact that human beings use *m* to form beliefs about virtue and its reliability: *m* is a reliable method for identifying virtues *because* human beings use it to do that. Moreover, if I use *m* because human beings do so by nature, and if either NATURAL EXTERNALISM or NATURAL CONSTRUCTIVISM is true, there is an (indirect) explanatory connection between *my* use of that method and its reliability: the reliability of my method follows from the explanation of my use thereof. (Structurally speaking, this

---

[21] Setiya, *Knowing Right From Wrong*, p. 126.
[22] Ibid., p. 126.
[23] Ibid., p. 132. All of these views are formulated in terms of virtue, but Setiya does this only for the sake of simplicity; in principle, variants could be constructed for any ethical term. Consider, for instance, NATURAL EXTERNALISM ABOUT WRONGNESS:

> NATURAL EXTERNALISM ABOUT WRONGNESS: Part of what it is to have the concept of moral wrongness is to belong to a life form whose method for identifying acts as wrong is sufficiently reliable.

[24] Ibid., p. 133.

account is similar to Enoch's third-factor account. The difference is that, whereas for Enoch, the "third factor" is the fact that survival is good, for Setiya it is that human beings use *m* to form beliefs about virtue.)

Consider, finally, the approach favored by Masahiro Yamada. Though Yamada's approach is very close to Setiya's, a couple of things distinguish the former from the latter. For one thing, where Setiya is happy to allow that the no accident condition on knowledge is satisfied if the explanatory connection runs from my use of some reliable method to its reliability, Yamada seems to think the condition can be satisfied only if the connection runs the other way. On his account, the relevant clause of the no-accident condition is as follows: "the truth-conduciveness of [S's method,] M…explains why S is using the method M."[25] Second, instead of the metaphysical and semantic views Setiya favors, Yamada plumps for an evolutionary-cum-conceptual account of the explanatory connection between our basic belief-forming methods and our use of them.

The evolutionary component of Yamada's account is one that will be familiar to those who follow the literature on genealogical debunking arguments, if only because stories like the one Yamada favors are there thought to be hopeless, at least in ethics.[26] The idea is simply that natural selection favored those of our ancestors who tended to get things right. As a result, the methods we use are truth-conducive, and that very fact at least partly explains our use of them.[27] The conceptual story holds that use of sufficiently reliable methods to form beliefs involving concept X is partly constitutive of understanding or having mastered X. The reliability of these methods thus explains why we use them rather than others to form beliefs about X: if these methods weren't reliable, we couldn't be said to be forming beliefs about X at all![28]

Yamada's story about how non-accidental truth is possible combines both possibilities as

[25] Yamada, "Getting It Right by Accident," p. 102.
[26] See, for instance, Street's discussion at "Darwinian Dilemma," §6.
[27] Yamada, "Getting It Right by Accident." p. 100.
[28] Ibid., p. 100-101.

follows:

> A theory of the ability to think constrains what kinds of thinking creatures are possible at all: thought is only possible when the basic methods of judgment used are truth-conducive. But the actual existence of thinking creatures like us must be explained causally. The theory of thought places constraints on what evolution can produce. Without this constraint, it is not at all clear that an evolutionary story can explain why we use truth-conducive belief forming methods. After all, what matters is that appropriate kinds of behavior are produced and appropriate behavior can very well be produced by beliefs, or even entire belief systems, that are widely off the mark…. But given the constraint that thought is only possible through the use of truth-conducive methods, evolution can only produce thinking creatures, if it produces any, who use truth-conducive methods of judgments because thought is only possible through the use of truth-conducive methods.[29]

The thought here is that use of a sufficiently reliable method for forming beliefs involving a concept, C, is partly constitutive of competence with C, a fact that constrains the space of possibilities with which natural selection can work; in particular, if natural selection is to produce creatures that form judgments involving C, they must do so using sufficiently reliable methods. The explanation of my use of some sufficiently reliable method to form beliefs involving C is thus partly conceptual and partly evolutionary. I am as I am because natural selection shaped me as it did, but given the nature of conceptual competence, selective processes could not have produced a being that forms the sorts of beliefs I form were it not for the fact that that being does so by means of a sufficiently reliable method. In that sense, its reliability explains my belief-forming method.

3.2.2. Trouble in Paradise

Creative as these attempts to establish the possibility of non-accidentally true belief are, they all run afoul of observations recently made by Karl Schafer.

> Schafer argues convincingly that there are
>
> two senses in which knowledge cannot be accidentally true:
>
> 1. If a belief is to count as knowledge, it must be reasonable to attribute the truth of that belief, as well as the positive epistemic features that are relevant to condition 2,

[29] Yamada, "Getting It Right by Accident," pp. 101-102.

to the believer.

2. If a belief is to count as knowledge, that belief must satisfy some sort of intuitive "reliability" condition—be that a matter of safety or reliability or something else less reductive.[30]

In other words, he says,

> knowledge requires both a non-accidental connection between a belief's truth and the knower and a non-accidental connection between its truth and the objects or facts that are known. In this way, knowledge requires both what we might call "subject-directed" non-accidental truth and "object-directed" non-accidental truth.[31]

The point of Schafer's object-directed condition (2) is, I take it, straightforward: if I form beliefs at random or using a method with no connection to the truth, my beliefs cannot be better than accidentally true. But the point of Schafer's subject-directed condition (1) may be less obvious. That condition is designed to deal with cases like the following:

> suppose that John accepts some highly complex but ultimately truth-conducive method M, but does so on obviously irrational grounds—such as a recommendation of M by the *National Inquirer*. Intuitively the beliefs that John forms via M do not count as knowledge. And this seems to be a the [*sic*] product of the fact that it would be unreasonable to attribute the truth-conduciveness of this method to John.[32]

Suppose that John successfully uses the method he learned from the *Inquirer* to predict who is going to win an open city council seat. To be sure, since his method is truth-conducive, and since John uses it to form this belief, there is a sense in which it is no accident that John's prediction turns out to have been accurate. This is the sense captured by Schafer's condition (2). Condition (1) explains why it is nevertheless an accident that John manages to predict the winner of the council race. Though the truth of his belief is certainly a result of something John does—namely, use a reliable belief-forming method—it's truth is not *attributable* to him. For the fact that his belief about who will win the council seat is true does not *explain* why he holds it. Nor does the reliability of his method explain why he uses it. He does not form the belief he does *because* it's true; nor does he use the

[30] Schafer, "Knowledge and Two Forms of Non-Accidental Truth," p. 389.
[31] Ibid., p. 374.
[32] Ibid., p. 390.

method he does *because* it's reliable. Or, to put the point another way, while both the truth of his belief and the reliability of his method are results of actions John takes, they are not the *intended* results. That his belief is true and his method reliable is nothing more than a good piece of epistemic luck. (Similarly in JIM, ETIENNE, DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY, and COIN FLIP.)

In my view, it's more accurate to call Schafer's view a refinement of the explanatory approach rather than one of its competitors. For rather than abandoning the demand for an explanatory connection, Schafer insists that such connections take a particular form: some intentional act of the relevant epistemic agent must figure in the explanation of both the reliability of her method and the truth of her belief. Even so, Schafer's observations make considerable trouble for the proposals considered in §4.2.1.

To see why, consider first the indirect explanatory connections suggested by third factor accounts. Suppose that Enoch, for example, is right: the *pro tanto* goodness of survival explains both why we hold the beliefs we do and why they are true. In that case, Schafer's object-directed condition (2) would seem to be satisfied, since the explanation of my beliefs entails their truth. Even so, the fact that my methods are reliable and my beliefs true might well have nothing to do with why I go on forming beliefs in the way I do. For all the third factor accounts say, I might be like Elsa in DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY, simply doing what feels right for beings like me in communities like mine. If I am, the truth of my beliefs and the reliability of my methods is not attributable to me in the way Schafer's subject-directed condition (1) requires, and my beliefs are only accidentally true.[33]

Things are similar with Setiya's NATURAL CONSTRUCTIVISM:

> NATURAL CONSTRUCTIVISM: For a trait to be a virtue is for creatures of one's life form to believe that it is a virtue.

[33] For a similar critique of third-factor views, see Elliot and Faraci, "Non-Naturalism and the Third Factor Gambit," esp. §2.

As we saw, so long as I form beliefs about virtue using the belief-forming method, *m*, that human beings use by nature and do so *because* that's what human beings do, NATURAL CONSTRUCTIVISM ensures that there is an explanatory connection between my method and its reliability: the reliability of my method follows from the explanation of my use thereof. But are the reliability of my method and the truth of the beliefs to which it leads me *attributable* to me in the relevant sense? Not necessarily. For suppose that the sense in which I use *m* because human beings do is just that I copied what I saw other people around me doing: I picked it up on the street, so to speak. In that case *m*'s reliability might well have nothing to do with my use of it: rather than trying to form true beliefs, I might have just been trying to fit in. If that's so, it's hard to see how either the reliability of my belief-forming method or the truth of the beliefs I form thereby could be attributable to me. *Pace* Setiya, then, my beliefs are, at best, accidentally true.

Consider next Setiya's NATURAL EXTERNALISM:

> NATURAL EXTERNALISM: Part of what it is to have the concept of ethical virtue is to belong to a life form whose method for identifying traits as virtues is sufficiently reliable.

If NATURAL EXTERNALISM is true, the reference of ethical concepts is fixed by the method, *m*, that human beings by nature use in such a way that *m* is guaranteed to be reliable. If, then, I form beliefs about virtue using *m because* that's what beings like me do by nature, it follows, again, that there is an explanatory connection between my method and its reliability: the reliability of my method follows from the explanation of my use thereof. As before, though, the reliability of my method and the truth of the beliefs to which it leads me may not be *attributable* to me in the relevant sense. For suppose that the sense in which I use *m* because human beings do is just that I am just acting on my natural inclinations, just as I am when, for example, I socialize with other human beings or use tools. In that case *m*'s reliability might well have nothing to do with my use of it: rather than trying to form true beliefs, I might have just been following the path of least resistance. If that's so, it's hard to see how either the reliability of my belief-forming method or the truth of the beliefs I form thereby

could be attributable to me. Once again, then, and again p*ace* Setiya*,* my beliefs are, at best, accidentally true.

Consider, finally, Yamada's hybrid evolutionary-conceptual view, according to which evolution can only produce thinking beings by producing beings whose judgments are more-or-less reliable. The trouble here is similar to that we encountered in Schafer's *National Inquirer* case. Suppose that Yamada's story is right, and suppose that I form true beliefs about which character traits are virtues using the reliable method, V, use of which is partly constitutive of competence with the concept of virtue. Since V is reliable, there is of course a sense in which it is no accident when the beliefs I form using V turn out true. Even so, in another sense it very much is an accident that my beliefs are true. For though the truth of his belief is certainly a result of something I do—namely, use a reliable belief-forming method—its truth is not *attributable* to me if its reliability played no role in my decision to use that method rather than some other. Rather, while both the truth of my belief and the reliability of my method are results of my actions, they are not the *intended* results. *Pace* Yamada, then, the fact that my belief is true and my method reliable is just a good piece of epistemic luck.

3.2.3. No Accident

I take it the shortcomings these proposals make clear that, if it is to be plausible, an explanatory account of the no-accident condition on knowledge is going to have to be more sophisticated than the rough gloss with which I began. But what, specifically, do the shortcomings I've noted here suggest about the shape of a better account of non-accidental truth? Plausibly, the lesson is that we cannot be too ecumenical about the kinds of explanatory connections we treat as relevant. In particular, we must take heed of the good point Schafer makes: if it is to be no accident that that my beliefs are true, their truth must be *attributable* to me, in the sense that their truth is to be explained,

at least in part, by some action I take or choice I make *qua* responsible epistemic agent. Likewise regarding the reliability of my method. So far as non-accidental truth is concerned, it is neither here nor there that there might be an explanatory story about connection between the reliability of my method and my use of it in which my epistemic agency plays no significant role. All of which is to say we should understand the no-accident condition roughly as follows:

NO ACCIDENT: When S knows that P,

1. S's belief that P is true
2. S formed the belief that P using a reliable method M, where a belief-forming method is reliable iff and to the degree that it produces or sustains mostly true judgments throughout nearby worlds
3. Both the truth of S's belief that P and the reliability of the method whereby she forms the belief that P are *attributable* to her, in the sense that S's belief that P is true, and her method reliable, *because of something S did*. In other words, S *deserves credit* for or *is responsible for* the truth of her belief that P and the reliability of her method.

This account can easily handle the cases that made trouble for SENSITIVITY and SAFETY. Consider, for instance, the case of Jim, discussed in §1.1 above. Jim's belief-forming methods are reliable, to be sure, but their reliability is no part of the explanation of his use of them. After all, how could it be? Not only does he not *know* his methods are reliable, he knows that, in normal conditions, they're *not* reliable! Moreover, since he has no reason to believe conditions are not normal, he has no reason to think they are reliable now. There is accordingly no explanatory connection between the reliability of Jim's methods and his use of them; according to NO ACCIDENT, this is why it is an accident that Jim's beliefs are true despite the fact that he forms them using a reliable method.

NO ACCIDENT also allows us to explain what goes wrong in ETIENNE. Etienne reasons as he does, not because he believes his method reliable, but because he is arrogant. So while his method is indeed reliable (due to the actions of his father's secret police force), there is no explanatory connection between the reliability of his method and his use of it. It is therefore an accident that the belief he forms thereby are true.

Similarly in DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY. Here Elsa forms ethical beliefs as she does, not because she recognizes that hers is a reliable method, but because it feels good to do things this way. Since, then, neither is attributable to her, both the reliability of her method and the truth of the beliefs to which it leads her are accidental.

Finally, consider what the account has to say about COIN FLIP. My method cannot help but be reliable: since I use it to decide whether or not to believe a necessary truth, if I form a belief at all, it will be true. Even so, since I decide to use this method on a whim, I do not deserve credit for its reliability. Any belief I form by flipping coins is thus only accidentally true.

Together, I take it the facts that it remedies the shortcomings of Yamada's and Setiya's proposals and can handle the cases that made trouble for SENSITIVITY and SAFETY amount to a fairly compelling case for NO ACCIDENT. Still, it can't hurt to bolster my case here by explaining how this account allows us to identify what goes wrong in a couple of famous cases of non-accidental truth.

So consider the following case from Gettier's famous paper:

> Suppose that Smith and Jones have applied for a certain job. And suppose that Smith has strong evidence for the following conjunctive proposition:
>
> (d) Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket.
>
> Smith's evidence for (d) might be that the president of the company assured him that Jones would in the end be selected, and that he, Smith, had counted the coins in Jones's pocket ten minutes ago. Proposition (d) entails:
>
> (e) The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket.
>
> Let us suppose that Smith sees the entailment from (d) to (e), and accepts (e) on the grounds of (d), for which he has strong evidence. In this case, Smith is clearly justified in believing that (e) is true. But imagine, further, that unknown to Smith, he himself, not Jones, will get the job. And, also, unknown to Smith, he himself has ten coins in his pocket. Proposition (e) is then true, though proposition (d), from which Smith inferred (e), is false.[34]

Here it is an accident that Smith comes to hold a true belief. But why? Though odd, his method

[34] Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" p. 122.

seems to be reliable. After all, as Gettier notes, (e) is a logical consequence of (d), so coming to believe the former by inferring it from the latter could not easily result in the formation of a false belief. Nevertheless, as the case illustrates, (e) might be true for reasons that have nothing whatsoever to do with the basis on which it was formed. This observation suggests a diagnosis: the trouble, it would seem, is with my condition (3): the truth of Smith's belief is not a *result* of anything Smith himself did. Rather than earning a true belief through honest epistemic work, Smith just gets lucky—the world just so happens to fall into line with his belief.

Consider next Goldman's false barn case, discussed briefly in chapter 2 (see §2.6.1). The diagnosis here depends on how we describe Henry's method.[35] Is it HENRY$_1$ or HENRY$_2$?

> HENRY$_1$: If you see a barn, judge that there is a barn.
>
> HENRY$_2$: If it looks to you as if there is a barn, and you have no reason to think the appearance misleading, judge that there is a barn.

Either way Henry's belief is only accidentally true, but the reasons are different in each case.

Suppose we say it's HENRY$_1$. In that case, Henry's method is necessarily reliable, since seeing is factive: if I see a barn, there is a barn. But the truth of Henry's belief is nevertheless not attributable to him. He does not check to see whether or not the thing he's looking at is a barn facade rather than a barn, so he cannot be said to have taken the care he would need to have taken in order to be sure that he did indeed see a barn. The trouble, in other words, is with condition (3).

Things are a bit simpler if we suppose his method is HENRY$_2$. While HENRY$_2$ is typically perfectly reliable, Henry's situation is not typical. Unbeknownst to Henry, he is in false barn country, where judging that there's a barn whenever it looks to you as if there is a barn is liable to leave you with a false belief a good deal of the time. On this reading of Goldman's case, then, the trouble is with my condition (2).

So much, then, for the no accident condition on knowledge. In the next section, I turn my

[35] A point made by Yamada at "Getting It Right by Accident," pp. 93-97.

attention to how our ethical beliefs might satisfy NO ACCIDENT.

3.3. Getting It Right on Purpose

In each of the cases just considered, the trouble stems from the fact that neither the reliability of the relevant agent's method nor the truth of their beliefs play any part in their decision to reason as they do. If the reliability of the agent's method and the truth of their beliefs *did* play some part in his or her decision to use that method and adopt that belief, or at least if they played the *right* part, it would clearly *not* be an accident were their beliefs to come out true.

This line of thought suggests the following, teleological account of how my ethical beliefs might satisfy NO ACCIDENT:

> GETTING IT RIGHT ON PURPOSE: for any ethical proposition P, I judge that P only if, and because, (it is true that) P.

Here the reliability of my method follows from its nature: since it requires that I believe that P only if P, the method is necessarily reliable. Moreover, when I use it, my beliefs are true, and since I hold them for the sake of their truth, their truth is obviously attributable to me. (In Aristotelian terms, their truth is the final cause of my beliefs.) But is the reliability of my method attributable to me? It seems so. After all, since my aim is to form true rather than false beliefs, I make a concerted effort to ensure that I do, an effort that explains why I am reliable. If that's right, GETTING IT RIGHT ON PURPOSE entails that my beliefs satisfy NO ACCIDENT.

It might be worried that this account commits me to an implausible form of doxastic voluntarism, according to which I have the same kind of direct, voluntary control over what I believe as I do over, for instance, what I imagine, or what I say (at least in English). (Call this *direct* doxastic voluntarism.) The thought here would be that, if I in fact lack this kind of control over what I believe, talk of the final causes of my beliefs is inappropriate, since in that case I can neither

choose what I believe nor, *a fortiori*, believe as I do for some particular reason, such as that the beliefs I hold are true.

In fact, however, my embrace of GETTING IT RIGHT ON PURPOSE does not commit me to direct doxastic voluntarism. Rather, though this account does commit me to *some* form of doxastic voluntarism, the control it requires I have over my beliefs need not be direct, as direct voluntarism maintains. Rather, GETTING IT RIGHT ON PURPOSE requires only that I have at least the same kind of *indirect* control over my beliefs that I have over, say, whether or not I can play a particular song on the guitar.[36] As things stand, Leo Kottke's "Vaseline Machine Gun" is far beyond my abilities as a guitarist. However, were I to practice intelligently and diligently, I might be able to play it after a few months. Just so, *indirect* doxastic voluntarism maintains, there are things I can do to cause myself to hold some beliefs rather than others. For instance, I might seek out the advice of experts and deliberately avoid what I know to be pernicious or irrelevant influences on the content of my beliefs (e.g., propaganda, or people in the habit of making claims they do not know to be true).

My suggestion is that their truth can be the final cause of my beliefs, not because I exercise direct voluntary control over my beliefs and deliberately form only true ones, but rather in the sense that I form beliefs by way of critical reflection precisely because I know that, properly carried out, it will lead me to form only true beliefs. Think about it like this. I want to form *only* true beliefs. Why? Because they're true! So what do I do? I cannot directly choose which beliefs to hold, but I can choose to use a belief-forming method—reflection—that is liable to lead me to form only true beliefs. So I choose that method, for the sake of its reliability. I thereby bring it about that I hold only true beliefs, with a view to doing just that. In that sense, their truth is the final cause of my beliefs.

Another natural worry about this account is that it might seem to me as though I'm using

[36] The idea for this example comes from Rico Vitz's IEP article, "Doxastic Voluntarism."

this method even though I'm not, as when some false proposition strikes me as true and I believe it for that reason. But isn't this just a fancy way of saying that I might make a mistake? And why should the mere possibility that I might make a mistake make trouble for this account of how my beliefs can satisfy NO ACCIDENT? Certainly it would be a problem if for some reason or other it were *impossible* for me to know whether or not it was true that P (for any ethical claim P), since in that case I obviously could not believe that P because P. But I have already considered at length and found wanting the best argument I know for anything like this position—namely, Street's argument that, if realism is true, the evidence available to us for ethical claims necessarily under-determines their truth.

Of course, this is not to say that it will be *easy* to use the relevant method. It won't be. Indeed, it isn't: I often try and fail to use it. In this sense the account is aspirational. Yet I see no reason why this should entail that it is an accident that I get it right, when I do, so long as the explanation for my doing so in those cases is that I did everything in my power to ensure that outcome, as GETTING IT RIGHT ON PURPOSE maintains.

Yamada would disagree with me here. He takes it that it is a necessary condition of non-accidentally true belief that the method whereby one forms that belief not be too easy to misapply. However his arguments for this claim are not convincing. For instance, regarding the method he calls "speech,"

SPEECH: if you see Saddam Hussein give a speech, conclude that he is alive!

he writes that though the method is clearly truth-conducive, it might yet be too easy to misapply. For suppose that, to confuse his enemies in precisely this way, Saddam has made sure that he has many doubles. In that case, he says, "it is too easy to misapply the rule by seeing a double giving a speech. And we would thus not consider it knowledge even if one came to the correct conclusion by

in fact seeing him give a speech."[37] But this is bizarre. The mere fact that someone might take herself to see Saddam when she is in fact looking at a double and form false beliefs about him on that basis is supposed to show that, if she does in fact see Saddam and comes to believe that he is alive on that basis, her belief is at best accidentally true. But why should that be right? Suppose I seem to see Saddam, take the time to check to make sure it is indeed him rather than one of his doubles, and on that basis infer that Saddam is alive. Why should that fact that someone sloppier than I am might have reached the same conclusion even if it were a double entail that the truth of *my* belief is a mere accident?[38]

I think what is going on here is that, without realizing it, Yamada is assuming that there is no way of distinguishing Saddam from one of his doubles, or at least no way of doing so on the basis of their appearances. If that is so, then it may well be impossible to know whether or not I am indeed seeing Saddam in a given instance. If it is, then obviously it would be an accident were I to come to believe, truly, that Saddam is alive on the basis of the fact that I seem to see him before me. Still, it does not follow that it would be an accident were I do so in a possible world in which it *is* possible to distinguish Saddam from his doubles. More importantly for our purposes, nor does it follow that the difficulty of using the method specified in GETTING IT RIGHT ON PURPOSE entails the impossibility of ethical knowledge. For as I have argued at length, Street is wrong: in ethics, we are not in the position of being unable to distinguish the true from the false.

To be clear, none of this is to say it is impossible to form an accidentally true belief using SPEECH or a similar method. Supposing that we take Henry to be using HENRY$_1$, Goldman's false barn case is a case of just that: Henry sees a barn and believes, on that basis, that there's a barn before him. But as we saw in §3.2.3, the trouble here is not with Henry's method but with the

[37] Yamada, "Getting It Right By Accident," pp. 88-89.
[38] The other examples Yamada discusses in §2.2 of his paper are structurally identical to this one and suffer from the same shortcoming.

connection between his belief and its truth—in particular, it stems from the fact that the truth of his belief here is not *attributable* to him. However, this sort of thing is explicitly ruled out by GETTING IT RIGHT ON PURPOSE, which stipulates that, when I believe that P, I do so *because it is true that P*. The truth of beliefs formed for the sake of their truth is always going to be attributable to the agent who holds them.

3.4. Field's Challenge

This concludes my response to Benacerraf's Challenge. Some readers may find this response adequate so far as it goes but worry that it is in a way incomplete. For, they will note, I have yet to explain how reflection could enable us to sort true from false beliefs in the first place. This is, in effect, Field's Challenge, and my aim in this final section is to answer it. My answer is inspired by and modelled on Amie Thomasson's account of how we can come to know metaphysical modal truths, so I'll begin by saying what that is.

Thomasson endorses a kind of simple realism about modality that she calls "Modal Normativism."[39] "On the normativist view," she explains:

> basic metaphysical modal claims do not have the function of tracking or describing special modal features of this world—or of describing other possible worlds. Instead, on this view, metaphysical modal language serves the function of expressing, teaching, conveying, or (re-)negotiating semantic rules (or their consequences) in particularly advantageous ways. […]
>
> On this view, metaphysical modal language follows certain inferential rules. For example, where we have an object-language statement of a semantic rule (or what follows from it, perhaps by plugging empirical facts into place-holders), we are entitled to add 'necessarily'. So, for example, given the semantic rule that one may only apply 'bachelor' where 'unmarried' may be applied, we can express that in the object language, and add 'necessarily' (in a way that makes that normative status explicit). Thereby, we can arrive at the object-language modal indicative: "Necessarily, all bachelors are unmarried".[40]

[39] See Thomasson, "Modal Normativism and the Methods of Metaphysics," "Norms and Necessity," "Non-Descriptivism about Modality: A Brief History and Revival," and "How Can We Come to Know Metaphysical Modal Truths."

[40] Thomasson, "How Can We Come to Know Metaphysical Modal Truths," pp. 11-12.

The semantic rules Thomasson has in mind here are rules that specify the conditions under which some term or concept applies (what she calls "introduction rules"). Generally speaking, Normativism holds that the introduction rule for "necessarily" is just that we have before us some introduction rule. If we do, we may tack on "necessarily," thereby making explicit its status as a constitutive semantic-conceptual rule.

Normativism makes possible a straightforward explanation of the possibility of modal knowledge, one that has nothing to do with gaining access to Plato's heaven. In Thomasson's words:

> The normativist demystifies modal knowledge by considering the move from using language to knowing basic metaphysical modal facts expressible in one's home language to be a matter of moving from mastering the rules for properly applying and refusing expressions (as a competent speaker), to being able to explicitly convey these constitutive rules in the object language and indicative mood, and to generalize and reason from them. While this may often be challenging, the move from mastering rules to being able to convey them explicitly in this way is not deeply mysterious—something similar must be done in working out grammatical rules, cultural behavioral rules, and, in general, in moving from competence to explicit instruction.[41]

In the following passage, she explains the point in a bit more detail:

> what explains the 'broad match' between our most basic (metaphysical) modal beliefs and the basic (metaphysical) modal facts…? Where do our basic metaphysical modal beliefs come from? On the whole, when all goes well, they come from our linguistic mastery: first, from our mastery of the rules of use for ordinary terms ('bachelor' and 'unmarried'); and second, from our mastery of the introduction rules for modal terms like 'necessity', which entitle us to stick 'necessarily' on to an object language expression of a rule of use, and so can bring us to reject a statement that there is a married bachelor, and to believe that it's necessary that bachelors are unmarried. Why do these beliefs tend to 'match' the modal facts? Talk of modal facts just involves hypostatization out of modal truths. On the normativist view, we can legitimately introduce a claim of metaphysical necessity by adding "Necessarily" on to any statement P that is an object-language expression of an actual semantic rule. And, employing a deflationary theory of truth, we are entitled to infer from "Necessarily P" to "it is true that [Necessarily P]". Where we have a true claim of the form "Necessarily P", we can also engage in trivial truth-preserving inferences that entitle us to infer from the true claim, "Necessarily P" to "It is a fact that P is necessary". Talk of modal facts just involves hypostatization out of necessary truths, and necessary truths just are object-language expressions of rules of use. The question of why our metaphysical modal beliefs tend to be true can just be reduced to the question of why we tend to be able to accurately express rules of use in object-language indicatives, and that can be explained by

[41] Thomasson, "Norms and Necessity," p. 152

our linguistic competence (including competence with the term 'necessity').[42]

In short, normativists hold that, to come by modal knowledge, we need only draw on our mastery of the semantic-conceptual rules that govern our language. Moreover, to explain how we can be reliable about modal matters, or how it can be that our modal beliefs tend to match the facts, the normativist draws on a deflationary theory of truth and facts to suggest the question is equivalent to the question how it is that our modal beliefs tend to be true. The answer to that question, normativists in effect say, is just that we understand the rules of the language of which we are competent speakers.

I want to tell a similar story about how reflection enables us to sort true from false ethical beliefs. In chapter 1, I suggested that the rules of the game of giving and asking for ethical reasons take the form of what Mark Lance and Margaret Little call "defeasible generalizations." These are claims like the following:

- Ceteris paribus, lying is wrong.
- Other things being equal, the fact that some activity would cause someone pain is a reason not to engage in it.
- Defeasibly, it would be wrong not to help someone in need if one could easily do so.
- Generally speaking, it is wrong to keep more than enough of some essential resource for oneself if others are struggling to meet their basic needs.
- Typically, one ought to comply with others' expressed wishes.

As with other semantic-conceptual rules, I suggested there, we learn these when we learn language; we must, since mastery of these rules is required for linguistic competence.

This basic picture suggests a straightforward response to Field's Challenge. Ethical reflection is a way of acquiring ethical knowledge because "reflection" is just what we call the process of drawing on our understanding of the linguistic-conceptual rules that govern our language to determine whether or not some term or concept applies in a given circumstance.

[42] Thomasson, "How Can We Come to Know Metaphysical Modal Truths?" p. 26.

In what Lance and Little call "privileged" contexts—those picked out by defeasible generalizations—the relevant thought process might go something like this. Suppose I come to find out that I've been misled. Perhaps, for instance, I learn that some shirt I was told was "ethically sourced" was in fact manufactured in one of the many Bangladeshi textile factories that abuse and mistreat workers in a variety of ways, among them by discouraging workers from taking bathroom breaks, forcing them to work overtime to meet unrealistic targets, and requiring them to work in unsafe working conditions. (To give just one example: in 2013, workers were forced to return to work at Rana Plaza the day after its owners were warned the building was not structurally sound, a decision that resulted in more than 1,100 deaths and more than 2,500 injuries when the building collapsed.[43]) Noting that no relevant defeating conditions obtain that would exonerate the seller's lie, I may infer, and thereby come to know, that the seller acted wrongly.

In a non-standard context, by contrast, the process might look something like this. Suppose I learn that my friend Sam lied to an ICE officer about the whereabouts of a refugee who, if caught, would be deported to his home country and tortured. Suppose I wonder whether or not Sam was wrong to do so. So I ask myself: do any defeating conditions obtain? That is, is there anything non-standard about the circumstances in which Sam lied? Drawing on my command of the relevant defeasible generalization, I might notice that there is. I might note that, had he told the truth, Sam would have caused the refugee a good deal of harm and done no good, whereas by lying, he did no real harm but greatly benefitted the refugee. Or, having just been reading political philosophy,[44] I might think that in attempting to deport refugees like the one Sam protected, the United States government and its agents are claiming for themselves a kind of authority no state can legitimately claim for itself. If I am persuaded that this is right, I will see Sam's act not just as permissible but as

[43] Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*, pp. 119-120, 134-135.
[44] I'm thinking, for example, of Chris Bertram's *Do States Have the Right to Exclude Immigrants?*

compulsory, a way of throwing sand in the gears of an unjust institution. In any case, though, so long as I judge that relevant defeating conditions obtain, I'll conclude that Sam did not act wrongly.

So far I've been explaining how reflection can be a means to knowledge of particular moral truths, but readers will wonder how it can help us come to know defeasible generalizations themselves. It can do so in a couple of ways.

One is by helping us to understand which contexts are privileged and which exceptional. To stick with the example of lying, it can do so by helping us to figure out when a verdict about the moral status of a lie calls for explanation. Thinking about the first case, where I was misled as to the provenance of my shirt, we may notice that wrongness of the lie is in no way noteworthy or surprising and so doesn't call for explanation. Thinking about cases like the second, where Sam does not act wrongly when he lies, we might notice that this is surprising and calls for explanation. In that way, we might come to see that contexts in which lying is wrong are privileged.

Another way reflection can help us come to know defeasible generalizations is by helping us to appreciate which conditions are defeating and why. Suppose I know that lying is defeasibly wrong and, in particular, that I know lying is not wrong when, by telling the truth, I would be perpetuating or supporting an unjust institution. But suppose I have never considered arguments purporting to show that the US immigration system or the prevailing border regime more generally are unjust. In that case, I might well judge that Sam did act wrongly when he lied to the ICE agent. But suppose I reflect on the justice of US immigration policy and become convinced that it is massively unjust and that cooperating with ICE agents amounts to perpetuating that injustice. Then, I would judge that Sam did not act wrongly, as I do in the example described above. In this way, reflection can help me not just to see defeating conditions where I didn't before, but also to understand them.

The foregoing account is only available to simple realists. As with the redundancy- and under-determination-based defenses of debunking arguments, I doubt explanatory realists have a

satisfactory answer to Benacerraf's Challenge and Field's Challenge; in this sense, I agree with Benacerraf and Field. In part this is because I regard explanatory realism as unintelligible in virtue of its commitment to the pseudo-possibility that super-gulfs might open up between our beliefs and the facts, as I explained in the last chapter. Even if this were not the case, though, Benacerraf and Field are right to say that explanatory realists have a hard row to hoe. Some have tried, of course,[45] but in my view, none have succeeded.[46]

3.5. Conclusion

Such, then, is my response to the third defense of debunking arguments I canvassed in chapter one.

In response to Benacerraf's Challenge, I agreed that there is an explanatory constraint on knowledge, namely the claim I'm calling NO ACCIDENT. However, I argued, Benacerraf is wrong to think our beliefs cannot satisfy this constraint if realism is true; in particular, I said, our beliefs will satisfy this constraint if we form beliefs only if, and because, they are true. I do not at all mean to say that GETTING IT RIGHT ON PURPOSE is the *only* way NO ACCIDENT could be satisfied. There may well be others. All that matters for purposes is that, if GETTING IT RIGHT ON PURPOSE is indeed true for some epistemic agent, her beliefs satisfy NO ACCIDENT.

In response to Field's Challenge, I drew on Amie Thomasson's normativist view of metaphysical modal claims to argue that there need be nothing mysterious in a simple realist's appeal to the potential of reflection to help us sort true beliefs. For, I said, reflection may serve that purpose even if we lack some nebulous faculty of intuition that allows us to access Plato's heaven. Instead, simple realists can say, reflection is simply the process of drawing on our linguistic competence to determine when terms do and do not apply.

---

[45] Probably the most prominent recent attempt is John Bengson's "Grasping the Third Realm."

[46] For criticism of Bengson, see Daniel Crow, "Causal Impotence and Evolutionary Influence," §2.4; for development and criticism of another proposal, see Ralf Bader, "The Grounding Argument against Non-Reductive Moral Realism" and Elliot and Faraci, "Non-Naturalism and the Third Factor Gambit," §4.

Together with the previous chapter, these arguments complete my response to debunkers. If sound, these arguments show that the strategies I mentioned in chapter one cannot help debunkers to block attempts by realists to invoke our capacity for critical reflection as part of an explanation of why we hold the beliefs we do.

4

Objections and Replies

In this final chapter, I round out the picture presented in chapters two and three by taking up a variety of objections to my response to debunkers. As a whole, this chapter serves to deepen and clarify my remarks in the previous chapters and to further situate my views within the broader literature.

4.1. Compatibility with Realism

I want to begin with three worries about my claim to have offered a realist-friendly response to debunking arguments. The first has to do with my suggestion that one can affirm the objectivity of ethics while denying the intelligibility of super-gulfs; the second with whether I can countenance the possibility of unknowable moral truths; and the third with whether the view I've called "simple realism" deserves to be regarded as a form of realism.

4.1.1. Super-Gulfs and Objectivity

The notion of objectivity is often understood in such a way as to preclude the possibility that one might affirm the objectivity of ethics but deny the intelligibility of super-gulfs. Of course, I am committed to regarding such conceptions as confused products of philosophical fantasy. Many readers will understandably find this puzzling. They will wonder whether one can coherently affirm the objectivity of ethics while denying that it is even so much as intelligible that there might yawn between our ethical beliefs and the facts the kinds of gulfs I've called super-gulfs. For, they will ask, is that not just *what it means* to say that our ethical beliefs may be objectively true? If it is, then my claim that we cannot make sense of the suggestion that there may be a super-gulf between our beliefs and the facts commits me to denying the possibility of objectivity itself.

Fortunately for me, there are other ways of thinking about objectivity. Recall the truth-conditional conception of objectivity I articulated in chapter one, the conception I said simple realists regard as fundamental:

> TRUTH-CONDITIONAL OBJECTIVITY: The moral proposition MP that *x* is *m* admits of objective truth in the sense that its truth *does not depend only* on any actual or hypothetical agent's (i) belief or non-cognitive attitude about *x*'s being *m* or (ii) non-cognitive attitude about *x*.

So understood, the question we need to answer if we want to know if the truth of some class of propositions admits of objective truth is just whether or not their truth depends *only* on the relevant sorts of facts about people's beliefs and attitudes. Or, what comes to the same thing, we might inquire after the truth of the following counterfactual:

> for any actual or hypothetical agent, any belief or non-cognitive attitude about *x*'s being *m*, and any non-cognitive attitude about *x*, there is some possible circumstance in which it would be false that *x* is *m* even if that agent had those beliefs or attitudes.

That is, we might ask whether or not there is any combination of actual or hypothetical agents, beliefs or non-cognitive attitudes about *x*'s being *m*, and non-cognitive attitudes about *x*, such that, necessarily, if that agent had those beliefs or attitudes, it would be true that *x* is *m*. To determine

that, we need to think about the truth conditions for the claim in question. If, for example, we want to know if the fact that a particular speaker believes that P is among the truth conditions for P, we need to consider whether or not P could be true if the speaker did not believe as much. Or, if we are interested the relevance of facts about whether or not there is open to some agent *a* a deliberative route to the conclusion that P given *a*'s subjective motivational set, we need to consider whether or not P could be true if there were no such route open to *a*.[1] And so on.

Now as a matter of fact I doubt that these or any other facts that would prevent ethical judgments from being such as to admit of objective truth are among their truth conditions. If I am told that someone believes that P, that the belief that P would be among her ethical beliefs were her all her beliefs in reflective equilibrium, that there is a deliberative route to P from her subjective motivational set, that she plans to act in accordance with P, or some such, I take it not just that there has not yet been adduced *sufficient* evidence for the claim that P but that *nothing whatsoever* that might reasonably be called evidence for P has so far been put forward: facts of these sorts just seem *irrelevant* if what we care about is whether or not some normative claim is *true*!

However, nothing in my argument hangs on whether or not I am right about this, since the crucial point for my purposes is, not that realism is true (though I believe it is), but that the response to debunkers I outlined in §1.2.1 is open to at least some realists (namely simple realists). For my purposes, then, what matters is just that there does not seem to be any reason I would need to avail myself of the possibility of a super-gulf opening up between my beliefs and the facts in order to defend the objectivity of ethics in the way I just described. For suppose that I am right: there is just no making sense of the (alleged) possibility that a super-gulf yawns between our ethical and related epistemic beliefs and the corresponding facts. Why should that entail that the answers to the kinds of counterfactual questions I canvassed at the end of the previous paragraph cannot turn out to be

[1] I take the ideas of a "deliberative route" and a "subjective motivational set" from Bernard Williams. See his "Internal and External Reasons."

"yes"?

Indeed, if anything the fact that we need not worry that super-gulfs might open up between our ethical beliefs and the facts makes that much easier the evaluation of the relevant counterfactuals. For in that case, it is not open to debunkers to appeal to the (alleged) possibility that, while I *think* some class of facts is irrelevant to the question whether or not our ethical judgments are true, and while, by the lights of all competent practical reasoners, they are, it is not clear that such facts *really are* irrelevant. For this would just be to suggest that a super-gulf might in fact yawn between my beliefs and the facts.

4.1.2. Recognition-Transcendence and Unknowable Moral Truths

Next I want to consider an objection inspired by Michael Dummett. Dummett thought the defining commitment of realism had to do with recognition-transcendence: according to realism, as Dummett saw things, there are or anyway can be facts that are unrecognizable in principle.[2] This is not universally accepted; for example, Crispin Wright denies as much in the following passage:

> There are, no doubt, kinds of moral realism which do have the consequence that moral reality may transcend all possibility of detection. But it is surely not essential to any view worth regarding as realist about morals that it incorporate a commitment to that idea.[3]

Still, Dummett's view has been influential enough that some philosophers would think my response inconsistent with realism were it to depend on denying (in Wright's terms) "that moral reality may transcend all possibility of detection." Moreover, it might seem that I *do* deny recognition-transcendence; in particular, my claims about super-gulfs might be thought tantamount to a denial of recognition-transcendence across the board. Is that right?[4]

In fact it's not. To illustrate the point, I'll discuss three different claims that might plausibly

[2] Dummett, "Realism."
[3] Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, p. 9.
[4] Thanks to Steven Gross and Richard Bett for pushing me to think about this.

be taken to have recognition-transcendent truth-conditions, explaining how I can allow for that possibility even as I deny that we can make sense of super-gulfs.

Consider first Goldbach's conjecture, according to which every even, positive integer greater than or equal to 4 can be expressed as the sum of two primes.[5] Goldbach first made the conjecture in a letter to Euler in 1742, and mathematicians have been trying to prove it ever since. As of 2012, it has been proven for integers less than $4x10^{18}$, but so far as I can tell, it's anyone's guess whether or not anyone will ever find a fully general proof. Plausibly, then, the truth or falsity of Goldbach's conjecture is recognition-transcendent. Does that mean that there might be a super-gulf between my belief in the Goldbach conjecture and the facts?

It might seem that it does. For even though we have a fair amount of evidence that the conjecture is true, there is still room to ask whether it *really* is. But this line of thought confuses run-of-the-mill belief-fact gulfs with super-gulfs. Nothing I have said is intended to deny that we can make sense of the possibility of error in cases where we lack some relevant evidence or have yet to consider some relevant possibility, and this is precisely what is going on in this case. That the conjecture has been proven for integers less than $4x10^{18}$ certainly gives us *some* reason to think it's true, but we cannot yet rule out the possibility that there is some even integer greater than $4x10^{18}$ for which the conjecture does not hold. Until we can, we will lack some relevant evidence, and it will be easy to make sense of the suggestion that the conjecture might not really be true. Moreover, the suggestion will remain intelligible even if we *never* rule out that possibility.

Suppose, however, that we did have before us a proof of the conjecture, one that was by all accounts impeccable. If, in that case, someone were to ask whether the conjecture was *really* true, that question *would* ask after a super-gulf, and we would rightly be puzzled by it. But to deny the intelligibility of this question is not to deny that of the suggestion that, since we do not know

[5] Eric Weisstein, "Goldbach Conjecture."

whether or not it holds for even integers greater than $4x10^{18}$, the conjecture might not really be true. Nor, accordingly, is it to deny that the truth or falsity of Goldbach's conjecture might be recognition-transcendent.

Consider next an empirical claim discussed in this connection by Hilary Putnam: there are no intelligent extraterrestrials.[6] Like that of Goldbach's conjecture, the truth of this claim is plausibly unknowable. There might be—in fact, probably are—parts of the universe we will never be able to investigate simply because they're too far away. If there are, then we will never be able to rule out the possibility that there is intelligent life there. Suppose I nevertheless form the belief that there are no intelligent extraterrestrials and that, having expressed that belief to a friend in conversation, she expresses doubt as to its truth. Is she entertaining the pseudo-possibility that there is a super-gulf between my belief and the facts? She certainly needn't be. Her reservations might stem from precisely the possibility just mentioned: there are parts of the universe we haven't yet investigated yet, and there might be intelligent life there. This possibility is clearly relevant to the truth of my claim. To be sure, that we haven't yet ruled it out entails that there might be a gulf between my belief and the facts, but this is a garden-variety belief-fact gulf, not a super-gulf.

Consider, finally, two ethical claims, the truth of which is plausibly recognition transcendent. Plausibly, those who can afford to ought to give some of their money to charity, but how much exactly? As has recently been pointed out by Sarah McGrath, it may be impossible to know:

> Let's assume that (1) I am morally required to give at least one dollar of my annual income to charity (if I failed to do this, I would be violating a moral obligation that I have) but that (2) I am not morally required to give all of my annual income to charity. Consider then the series of claims "I am morally required to give at least $1 of my income to charity"; "I am morally required to give at least $2 of my income to charity";…"I am morally required to give at least $z of my income to charity" (where z represents my total annual income). If classical logic applies to moral propositions, then there is guaranteed to be some highest number n such that (i) I am morally required to give n dollars to charity, but (ii) I am not morally required to give n+1 dollars to charity. However, even if I'm thinking rationally and am knowledgeable about the nonmoral facts, it doesn't follow that I'm in a position to know

[6] Putnam, "Are Values Made or Discovered," p. 107.

> what that dollar amount is.[7]

Another, similar case has been proposed by Clayton Littlejohn:

> consider a series of increasingly dangerous neighborhoods and consider the plight of a parent who has to determine whether to let the kids out to play unsupervised or to keep the kids indoors where it is safer."[8]

Where exactly is the cut-off point beyond which it would be reckless to let the kids play unsupervised? Again, it may be impossible to know.

The trouble in these cases is a bit different from that in the other two cases we've considered. In each of those cases, it was clear what evidence we needed but lacked. We cannot say whether Goldbach's conjecture is true because we lack a proof, and we cannot say whether there are intelligent extraterrestrials because there are places in the universe we haven't been and may never be able to go. In these cases, by contrast, it is less clear what evidence we need. In the first case, we obviously need some consideration that would distinguish the minimum permissible amount of money we are obligated to give from an amount that is close but insufficient. In the second, we need some reason to think some neighborhood is too dangerous for the kids even though a slightly less dangerous one is not. The trouble, in each case, is that it's just not clear what kinds of considerations might help us decide where exactly to draw the line.

Does it follow that there might be a super-gulf between my beliefs and the facts about how much I'm obligated to give to charity or where it's safe for my kids to play? Again, no. Certainly it's the case that, were I to assert that I'm obligated to give $300 and not a penny more this year, someone might intelligibly ask whether that's really all I'm obligated to give. But this needn't be an attempt to ask about a super-gulf. Instead, a question like this might be motivated by the

---

[7] McGrath, "Moral Realism without Convergence," p. 72. McGrath is picking up on ideas previously discussed by Jussi Suikkannen and Ralph Wedgwood. See Suikkanen, "Williamson and (Moral) Realism" and Wedgwood, "There Are Unknowable Moral Truths."

[8] This case was proposed by Clayton Littlejohn in the comments on Wedgwood's "There Are Unknowable Moral Truths."

straightforward observation that $300 is not really so different from $301 or $297. How, the question would then ask, can I be so sure that the right amount is $300 rather than a bit less or a bit more? It is hard to see how I might come up with an answer; nevertheless, the gulf is ordinary: it stems from my lack of evidence required by the rules of the game of giving and asking for ethical reasons rather than from the essential inadequacy of the game itself.

I take these considerations to show that my claims about super-gulfs do not commit me to denying that ethical or any other types of facts may be recognition-transcendent. In addition, they help to further clarify the nature of super-gulfs. A super-gulf, I hope it will now be clear, is a gulf between our beliefs and the facts that might yawn even if, having considered all of the relevant possibilities and gathered all relevant evidence, there is every indication that we are correct and none that we are wrong, where which possibilities and evidence are relevant is itself a question to be settled through substantive debate. In other words, questions about super-gulfs are supposed to express concerns about the reliability of our investigative practice as a whole. Questions about run-of-the-mill belief-fact gulfs, by contrast, ask whether we have satisfied the standards constitutive of that practice.

4.1.3. "So, we just make it all up…?"

Finally, I want to consider an objection stemming from my suggestion, in chapter one, that ethics is just a sort of language-game—the game of giving and asking for ethical reasons, I've called it. If that's so, critics will wonder, doesn't it follow that we do just make it all up after all? And isn't a view like that at odds with realism?

I take it the worry here is that, if we make up the game of giving and asking for reasons, we make up the ethical facts. For if we get to decide the rules of the game, the thought goes, we could just easily have played a radically different game, one where—for example—garments count as

ethically sourced *only if* and *because* they are made in conditions comparable to those in Bangladeshi textile factories. And if the facts are in that way up to us, they can't be objective.

Thomasson confronts a similar objection to her normativist view of modal discourse. In response, she insists that

> we must rid ourselves of the mistaken idea that the normativist view entails that if the rules were different, different things would have been necessary or possible…. That is simply not so. If the constitutive rules governing the letters in 'building' for example, were different, enabling us to apply 'same building as' where a structure is destroyed and replaced with one on the same site following a similar architectural plan, then it is not the case that in that world a building (now using our term) could survive demolition (whereas in the actual world they cannot). Instead, it would be that a building* (their homophonic term) could survive demolition. That is a modal truth that is not expressible in our language, but that is not to say that it is false at our world; it is just that we do not have the word 'building*' and so cannot express it. In short, where semantic rules differ, there are differences in what modal truths may be *expressed*, quite simply because the languages differ—but that should be no surprise. But that is not to say that which modal claims (if they were to be uttered) would be *true* differs where the languages differ. We need not let the critic worry us on that score.[9]

In a more recent essay, she puts the point this way:

> Modal normativists can and do accept…independence counterfactuals [i.e., counterfactuals like the following: seals would be mammals even in worlds in which there were no speakers or thinkers (and so in which we don't use the relevant terms) at all]: for while the existence of a claim (or the meaningfulness of the relevant piece of language) 'Necessarily, seals are mammals' may depend on human language, its truth, on the normativist view, does not so depend. We evaluate the truth of counterfactuals (whatever they are) in ways that hold the meaning of the claim intact while we conduct the evaluation. So, in this case as with others, when we ask whether 'Necessarily, seals are mammals' would be true in other circumstances, we do so without changing the meaning of 'seal', 'mammal', or the other terms in the sentence.[10]

The crucial point here is that the semantic-conceptual rules in question are *constitutive*, in the sense that they determine the meanings of our words and the extensions of our concepts. Given that that is so, it cannot be right that, if we had adopted different rules, different modal facts would obtain. Rather, if we had adopted different rules, we would be using different words. We would in that case be able to *express* different modal truths, but we wouldn't have thereby made it the case that different

[9] Thomasson, "Norms and Necessity" pp. 153-154.
[10] Thomasson, "How Can We Come to Know Metaphysical Modal Truths" p. 21. Cf. her cf. *Ontology Made Easy*, pp. 60, 86.

truths obtain. The truths we can express now would still hold, just as those we would then be able to express hold now.

I want to make similar claims about the game of giving and asking for ethical reasons. Consider a defeasible generalization that plausibly functions as a constitutive rule of our game: defeasibly, it would be wrong not to help someone in need if one could easily do so. The objector worries that, had we instead played a game governed by the opposite rule, according to which it would be defeasibly wrong *to* help someone in need if one could easily do so, then that would be true. Note that, in this alternative game, it is not just that it would *sometimes* be wrong to help someone if one could easily do so, as it would be in ours if helping them involved becoming a collaborator in the commission of some injustice (for example). This alternative game is supposed to differ much more radically from ours. In it, the default situation is that it would be wrong to help someone if one could do so easily; only in exceptional circumstances would it not be wrong to do that. My suggestion here is that, provided we hold fixed the meanings of "help," "easily," and all the other words in the generalization, we must regard their word "wrong" as having a different meaning than does our word "wrong." In the mouths of participants in this fictional game, "wrong" stands to our "wrong" in the same position as "building*" does to our "building" in Thomasson's example: though homophonic, the words, and their meanings, are distinct.

To be sure, the point needs to be stated carefully so as not to rule out the possibility of substantive disagreement about ethical matters; a full treatment of the issue is beyond the scope of my project, but I say a bit more about this in the subsequent sections. In any case, if this general picture is correct, I can reply to the objection in basically the same way as does Thomasson. Even if we played this alternative game, it would not then be the case that it would be wrong to help those in need if one could do so easily, or at least that does not follow in any sense that I need worry about. For though it would in that case be true that (mentioning this different word) it would be

wrong to help in that circumstance, it would *not* be true that (now using our word) it would be wrong to help in that circumstance. Things would be otherwise, of course, if facts about what sort of game we play or words we use were among the truth conditions for our word "wrong," but that is not the kind of game we have. *Our* game is such that an act is wrong, when it is, regardless of what game we play, what words we use, and, for that matter, whether or not we play any games or even exist. We therefore do not get to decide how things stand, ethically speaking. Given that our words mean what they do, that is not up to us.

4.2. Schmeasons and Easy Pluralism

Next I want to take up an objection closely related to this last, one that has been made, in different ways, by several people, including David Enoch, Tristram McPherson, Daan Evers, and Bart Streumer.[11] The thought that animates these philosophers is, in effect, that one *has* to countenance the possibility that super-gulfs might open up between our beliefs and the facts in order to explain why we ought to prefer the conclusions supported by good practical reasoning over those supported by various apparently similar alternatives. Those alternatives might be embodied in the practices of significantly different cultures, of people within our own culture with radically different views, of other intelligent life forms, or even of eccentric individuals, but for the sake of simplicity, I will mostly just focus on the activity Tristram McPherson calls "schmeasoning.[12]" In schmeasoning, the ethical significance of non-normative facts is exactly the opposite of that they are taken to have in good practical reasoning: for instance, the fact that it would cause someone to suffer is a schmeason to perform an act. Enoch et al. in effect ask: how can we *explain* the fact that we ought to endorse and act in accordance with those conclusions supported by good reasoning rather than those

[11] See Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, pp. 122-128; McPherson, "Against Quietist Normative Realism," pp. 232-238; and Evers and Streumer, "Are the Moral Fixed Points Conceptual Truths?"
[12] "Against Quietist Normative Realism," §4. Enoch talks in this connection about "counter-reasoning," which seems to be the same thing.

supported by good schmeasoning? In other words, they ask

> THE SCHMEASONS QUESTION: How can we explain the fact that, if we want to know what we ought to do, we should we reason instead of schmeason? Or in other words, why should we accept those claims about what we ought to do for which we have good reasons rather than those for which we have good (schmood?) schmeasons?

If we entertain the (alleged) possibility that a super-gulf might open up between our beliefs and the facts, it can seem clear what form the requisite explanation would have to take. Regarding some claim, P, such that good schmeasoning entails we ought to endorse P but good reasoning entails we ought to reject P, we can ask: given that the standards recognized by these two different discourses suggest divergent conclusions, what ought we *in fact* to do? Here the suggestion is that there is a super-gulf between the conclusion recommended by one of these practices and the facts, and we are being asked to compare each of the relevant conclusions to reality from sideways on so as to vindicate the one practice and undermine the other. The idea is that, if only we could do so, we could explain why we ought to reject P by noting that, *as a matter of fact*, P. If, though, we think super-gulfs are unintelligible, this option is not open to us. In that case, it can easily seem unclear how else we might explain the fact that we ought reject P.

Fortunately for me, though, the objection is confused. To see why, note first that it leaves ambiguous the precise nature of schmeasoning. Suppose that we are in the position of radical interpreters,[13] observing a person or people engaged in schmeasoning, and suppose that they do something that resembles what we call reaching a conclusion they take to be supported by good schmeasons. In particular, they appear to take themselves to have good schmeasons to believe a claim they express using the sounds we would make were we to say following words: "given that they are disproportionately responsible for the climate-related harms people in poor countries are liable to suffer, it would be wrong for residents of wealthy countries to go out of their way to prevent those harms." I take it that there are extremely compelling reasons to think their historical

[13] On this notion, see Davidson, "Radical Interpretation" and "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme."

responsibility for climate change obligates residents of wealthy countries to work to mitigate climate change and the climate-related harms it will inflict on residents of poor countries, so suppose that we, in our role as radical interpreters, believe as much. Now: how should we understand the relationship between the conclusion reached by these schmeasoners and our own view here?

Two very different views seem possible: on the one hand, we might conclude that schmeasoning is a completely different discourse or practice from the one we call practical reasoning, one that only superficially *appears* to have the same subject matter (namely, what we ought to do); on the other, we might conclude that, though schmeasoning is unusual, it is not a different practice or discourse but just a highly eccentric form of practical reasoning.[14] In the first case, the conclusions of schmeasoning do not contradict those of reasoning any more than, say, the claims of fashion critics contradict those of climate scientists; in the second, they do. In each case, I will argue, we can ask a version of what I have called THE SCHMEASONS QUESTION, but, in neither do we need to brook the possibility of super-gulfs in order to answer it.

Take the second case first. Suppose that we find someone schmeasoning and determine that her practice is nevertheless enough like ours that we are willing to call what she does practical reasoning by another name—that is, what she calls "schmeasoning" is actually just really bad reasoning. If her views are perfectly coherent, she is just an ideally coherent eccentric. In this case, THE SCHMEASONS QUESTION amounts to how we can explain to her—and to ourselves—why we ought not to reason as she does—how, that is, we can explain why we ought to believe that their historical responsibility for climate change obligates residents of wealthy countries to work to mitigate climate change and the climate-related harms it will inflict on residents of poor countries. As far as I can see, there's nothing especially mysterious about how to do this: we ought to believe

[14] Enoch's talk in *Taking Morality Seriously* of a disagreement arising "between a follower of morality and a follower of morality*" (p. 112) and of "translating" counter-reasons talk into reasons talk suggests (p. 125) that he might plump for this option, but other things he goes on to say in his discussion of Scanlon muddy the waters somewhat.

as we do because our belief is true and the ideally coherent eccentric's false. Similarly, if we instead want to explain, not why some particular belief of hers is the wrong one to hold and ours the right one, but why hers is the wrong and ours the right way to form ethical beliefs, it is enough to point out that she is consistently and systematically mistaken. Here there need be no attempt to climb outside our heads,[15] look at the two beliefs or ways of thinking in question from sideways on, and verify that the one rather than the other corresponds to or reliably leads us to beliefs that correspond to the world: since this person is *ex hypoethesi* engaged in the same practice we are, truth needn't be anything more than disquotability.[16]

Consider now the first precisification of THE SCHMEASONS QUESTION I mentioned, the one on which reasoning and schmeasoning are understood as distinct discourses or practices. Here it is helpful to consider an analogy with two different games. In particular, consider a variant of chess McPherson calls "schmess."[17] Schmess is the same as chess except that in schmess, knights may move diagonally only, like bishops. Now suppose I and a friend are playing chess and, after I have moved my knight in the normal way, my friend objects on the grounds that this violates the rules of schmess. Quite reasonably, I might respond by saying that, while true enough, this observation is irrelevant: we are playing chess, not schmess. Similarly in the case of reasons and schmeasons, at least if these are understood to be distinct discourses or practices. That is, if I am trying to figure out whether or not the pain it would cause my niece is sufficient reason not to swat away the stinging insect that has just landed on her arm, I will not find it helpful to be told that the fact that it will cause her pain is a schmeason to swat the insect. Be that as it may, I might respond, that is irrelevant: what I care about is whether or not I have sufficient *reason* to swat the bug!

These considerations suggest that THE SCHMEASONS QUESTION is not particularly difficult

[15] For the phrase "trying to climb outside our own minds," see Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 9.
[16] I am thinking here of deflationary conceptions of truth like that defended in Horwich, *Truth*. For a similar suggestion, see McDowell, *Mind and World*, lecture II, §5 and "Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity," §5.
[17] McPherson, "Against Quietist Normative Realism," p. 232.

to answer on this precisification either. Since THE SCHMEASONS QUESTION assumes we are trying to figure out what we *ought* to do, and since schmeasoning cannot but reasoning can help us to do that, it seems obvious that we ought to reason rather than schmeason.[18]

This line of thought will seem to miss the point so long as the question whether we ought to decide what we ought to do by schmeasoning rather than by reasoning (THE SCHMEASONS QUESTION) is thought to be analogous to the question whether we should play chess or schmess. But—crucially—that cannot be right. When we ask whether we ought to reason or schmeason to figure out what we ought to do, we have already in effect presupposed that the activity we are engaged in is reasoning rather than schmeasoning: we want to know how to decide what we *ought* to do, not what we *schmought* to do. The relevant analogue in the chess/schmess case is accordingly not whether we ought to play chess or schmess but, rather, something like this: if I want to know whether or not a particular move is allowed in chess, should I consult the rules of chess or schmess? Here, it seems, the answer is obviously that we should consult the rules of chess. Similarly, I am suggesting, if we want to know what we *ought* to do, we had better do some reasoning rather than waste our time schmeasoning.

I expect that Enoch et al. will find all of this utterly unsatisfactory for reasons best captured using a distinction introduced by McPherson.[19] A practice exhibits what McPherson calls "formal normativity" just in case it is possible to fail to act in accordance with the standards constitutive of that practice. So in contrast to, say, free association or deciding which flavor of ice cream to eat, schmess exhibits formal normativity no less than does chess, since it is possible to make an illegal move in schmess just as it is in chess. Similarly for reasoning and schmeasoning if these are understood as distinct practices: just as one can make mistakes about what reasons one has, one can

[18] This argument bears considerable similarity to what Aaron James calls "the Intelligibility Argument" in §5 of his "Constructing Protagorean Objectivity."
[19] "Against Quietist Normative Realism," pp. 232-233.

draw incorrect conclusions about what schmeasons one has. But McPherson thinks—and Enoch, Evers, and Streumer in effect concur—the practice of reasoning itself is often thought to be superior to that of schmeasoning in a sense that cannot be captured in terms of formal normativity. To capture the kind of superiority at issue here, McPherson introduces what he calls "robust normativity," claiming that reasoning is but schmeasoning is not *robustly* normative. Because I have not explained why reasoning is but schmeasoning is not *robustly* normative, I expect Enoch et al. would say, I have not adequately explained how we can answer THE SCHMEASONS QUESTION without admitting the intelligibility of super-gulfs.

I disagree. I think we should be deeply suspicious of the claim that we need to demonstrate that one practice or the other is "robustly" normative in order to answer THE SCHMEASONS QUESTION, since in my view, it is not even clear what it would mean to do that. McPherson's appeal to chess and schmess in explaining his concern suggests that the relevant precisification of THE SCHMEASONS QUESTION here is the first, on which reasoning and schmeasoning are understood as distinct practices rather than simply as divergent ethical views. If that's right, though, there is no sense to be made of the question which of the two practices we ought to go in for. The comparison with chess and schmess is liable to mislead us here, as it apparently does McPherson. Since in that case the question whether we ought to play chess or schmess is perfectly intelligible, it can seem as though there were some analogous question to ask in the case of reasoning and schmeasoning. But, we should ask, what might that be? The trouble is that, unlike playing chess or schmess, playing the game of giving and asking for ethical reasons is in an important sense not optional. *Whenever* we come to consider whether or not we *ought* to do something, we are always already playing, whether we want to or not: in that sense, it's the only game in town. Hence the oddness of questions like "Why ought I to be moral?" and, even stranger, "Ought I to do what I have most reason to do?" We

might as well ask whether green things are green![20]

Of course, we might instead ask whether, in order to decide what we schmought to do, we ought to reason or schmeason. We could even ask whether, in order to do that, we *schmought* to reason instead of schmeason. But, Enoch et al. would say, none of these questions capture the intended force of the question whether reasoning or schmeasoning is robustly normative. *That* question is supposed to invite us to engage in some further practice, independent of and somehow more fundamental than either of these, by engaging in which we might determine whether reasoning or schmeasoning is in some sense the *right* practice. But what might that practice be? Indeed, how could we even formulate the question that is supposed to invite us to do that? In what sense of "right" are we wondering which practice is the right one?

I hope it will be clear that this suggestion is of a piece with what I have been emphasizing all along. When someone wonders whether or not our practice is "robustly" normative, she means to be asking a question analogous to the contemporary historian's question about the accuracy of claims made in hagiographies. She is happy to grant me that my practice is formally normative and that my conclusions accord with the standards that make it so, but she wants to know: is your belief also *robustly* normative? But this is just a new way of articulating the same philosophical fantasy I have been attacking for some time now. Whether we choose to speak in terms of super-gulfs or in terms of robust normativity, the issues are the same.

One upshot might be obvious but is nevertheless worth making explicit. For the most part, I have discussed the problem suggested by Enoch, et al. in highly abstract terms, but the point at issue throughout has been nothing less than the very possibility of radical social critique of the sort exemplified by the abolitionists, critics of institutions like coverture, segregation, and monarchy, and various kinds of civil rights activists. For example, instead of schmeasoning and reasoning, I might

[20] Philippa Foot makes a kindred point at the end of *Natural Goodness*, ch. 4; cf. Warren Quinn, "Putting Rationality in Its Place."

have spoken instead of the dispute between proponents and opponents of segregation or slavery whose ethical outlooks differed radically. Seen in this light, THE SCHMEASONS QUESTION acquires an importance it might not have otherwise seemed to have, and inability to answer it looks like a far more significant theoretical shortcoming. Fortunately, nothing in my view precludes an answer.

It is also worth noting that this same argument allows me to reject the view Jared Warren has called "easy pluralism":

> EASY PLURALISM: in nearby scenarios where we adopt an alternative theory of X incompatible with our actual theory of X, that alternative theory is true in the language spoken in that nearby scenario.[21]

Let the claims that constitute some alternative ethical theory—of rightness, say—be P_1-P_n. Given that what we are talking about is an alternative theory of *rightness*—as opposed to schmightness or whatever—the case in which we adopt this alternative theory is analogous to the case, described above, in which we encounter an ideally coherent eccentric. And here as there, we can say that P_1-P_n are true just in case P_1-P_n. That by itself does not rule out the possibility that the truth of P_1-P_n depends on whether or not we believe P_1-P_n; as I emphasized in §§1.5.2 and 4.1.1 above, whether that is so is itself a substantive ethical question to be settled be evaluating relevant counterfactuals. Importantly, however, my appeal here to minimalism about truth does not commit me to any view about the answers to these substantive questions. It follows that I am not committed to EASY PLURALISM. This is an important result, since as Warren notes, that it can reject EASY PLURALISM is plausibly necessary for a view to qualify as a form of realism.

4.3. Disagreement

Next I want to consider a worry about disagreement, one that is easiest to bring out using an example. Suppose that A and B disagree about the permissibility of abortion: A thinks it is

[21] Warren, "Epistemology versus Non-causal Realism," p. 1652.

permissible in a wide variety of cases, but B thinks it is only permissible in cases of rape, incest, and those in which the mother's life is endangered. Suppose that their disagreement stems, as Ronald Dworkin suggests all such disagreements do, from differing views about what makes human life valuable.[22] So A takes the value of a human life to stem primarily from the extent to which a person and others have invested in his life—for example through education, forming and maintaining various social bonds and relationships, etc. B, by contrast, takes the value of a human life to stem primarily from its miraculous character: B thinks each life is a sacred miracle and so must not be destroyed except in extreme cases. Because of these views, A takes it to be obvious that the value of the mother's life vastly outweighs that of the fetus, but B thinks the two lives are equally valuable.

Now, suppose that A and B get to talking about the permissibility of abortion and figure out that their disagreement stems from disagreement about this deeper issue. If they have the time and the inclination, each might make an argument or two in favor of their position, but soon enough their reasons will run out, and if both parties remain unconvinced of their opponent's view, neither will have much of anything left to say to the other. "But," B might ask A, "don't you see? That a bunch of unthinking matter can organize and maintain itself as a human being is almost *incredible*! It would be tragic to destroy something so miraculous." We can imagine A responding with incredulity. Perhaps she would say something like this: "Really?! I mean, sure, it's amazing and all that, but even so, how could the life an unborn fetus possibly be so valuable that it would be wrong for the mother to end the pregnancy on the grounds that having the baby would completely upend her life and force her to abandon many goals and projects she has been working on for years?"

This kind of impasse is, I take it, familiar enough. It matters for my purposes because my views might be thought to license unduly dismissive responses to these kinds of disagreements. For it might seem as though I were committed to saying that the questions I just suggested for A and B

[22] See Dworkin, *Life's Dominion*.

ask after super-gulfs and so are unintelligible. If that's right, then I am committed to approving of A responding to B by accusing B of not making sense, and vice versa. Armed with my dissertation, the thought goes, they might simply dismiss each other as loons!

Fortunately, I'm not committed to endorsing any of this. Attempts to ask after super-gulfs are characteristically attempts to call into question the reliability of the entire investigative practice. They are supposed to invite us to set aside *all* of our views about what counts in favor of what, which principles we can rely on when, and so on and to ask, from sideways on, whether this way of going about things is liable to lead us to the truth. But neither of these questions attempts to do anything of the sort. The disagreement between A and B is instead a disagreement about the relative weight to give two considerations both take to be relevant to questions about the permissibility of abortion and that are typically treated as relevant in ethical inquiry generally, namely that human life is valuable and that the mother in question has various projects and goals of her own that the birth of her child would disrupt enormously. B takes the former consideration to be of decisive importance here, while A takes this to be true of the latter. Who is right is, no doubt, a complicated question, but the dispute between them is a garden-variety ethical one, not a radical attempt to question the reliability of our investigative practice as a whole.

To be sure, there are more general concerns about disagreement in the offing here. In my view, by far the most compelling worry in this vein is Sarah McGrath's argument that disagreements of precisely this sort represent an obstacle to the possibility of moral knowledge.[23] Fortunately for me, there is good reason to think she is mistaken.[24]

---

[23] See McGrath, "Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise."

[24] See Decker and Groll, "On the (In)Significance of Moral Disagreement for Moral Knowledge." For additional discussion and criticism of McGrath's argument, see Sherman, "Moral Disagreement and Epistemic Advantages"; King, "McGrath on Moral Knowledge"; McGrath, "Reply to King"; and King, "Rejoinder to McGrath"; and Setiya, *Knowing Right from Wrong*, ch. 1.

4.4. Undetectable Unreliability

There is, however, another significant worry suggested by disputes like that between A and B, disputes in which our spades get turned before we convince another and we are left with little to do beyond appealing to one another to reconsider. It is certainly possible that some party to some such dispute might wrongly take the possibility her opponent is arguing for to be unintelligible: she might simply find herself unable to make sense of the suggestion being put forward. If she does, she might simply dismiss her opponent and go on with her life, confident all the while that there are no intelligible challenges to her view. So the question arises: is there anything she can do to recognize that she's mistaken?

If there's not, I'm in trouble. For suppose that, despite her best efforts to do so, someone might fail to recognize that some ethical claim is true or that some question is in fact intelligible; suppose further that she has no way of recognizing that this is her situation. It would seem to follow that we might be *undetectably unreliable* at recognizing certain ethical facts. Moreover, provided the class of such facts is sufficiently large, it would follow that we might be undetectably unreliable about ethical facts generally. If that's right, then the evidence available to us in ethics is not such as to allow us to rule out the possibility that we are radically mistaken, and any ethical beliefs we form could be, at best, accidentally true.

Fortunately, we *can* come to recognize these sorts of mistakes. To focus the issues, I'll use an example to explain how.

Consider a proponent of retributive justice, someone who thinks the justification for punishment is that some people deserve to suffer for their transgressions. Imagine, for instance, a cowboy who believes that a cattle rustler deserves to be hanged. This kind of view is a recurring theme in many Westerns but has particular prominence in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, in which the main character—introduced by the narrator simply as "the Virginian"—hangs a friend of his for

exactly this crime. (The book dramatizes the so-called Johnson County War in 1880s Wyoming, where real-life vigilantes actually did similar things.) Now consider how the Virginian might react to the suggestion that he's mistaken, not just here, but in many other cases: in fact, no one deserves to die for their crimes—not even rustlers. He would likely find this utter rejection of retributivism so foreign to his world view that he would have a hard time making sense of it. Nevertheless, it's a perfectly intelligible view. How might he come to see as much?

My thought here is an Aristotelian one that John McDowell has expressed in a number of places but perhaps most clearly in his response to Bernard Williams,[25] namely that there are cases such that, before one can come to see the truth in ethics, there is a need for something like conversion. At root, the necessary shift is affective: the would-be convert needs to find a way to open themselves up to new possibilities. This sort of thing is an essential component of many people's moral education, especially when it comes to confronting entrenched forms of prejudice and oppression.[26] Often, it involves quite a bit more than simply being told what sort of inferences to draw and which claims to believe. I mean to leave it open exactly what else might be necessary, but there are lots of plausible candidates: one might read fiction and poetry; watch TV shows, plays, and movies; or spend time with or otherwise learn about people different from those one usually encounters, visit unfamiliar places and cultures, and otherwise do things one does not normally do.[27]

---

[25] See "Might There Be External Reasons?", esp. §4.

[26] Consider, in this connection, the difficulty of recognizing that some of one's own behaviors and views are racist or misogynistic. For example, Kate Manne has recently argued persuasively that many people's sense that Hillary Clinton was a corrupt or seedy individual was, at least in part, a reflection of misogynistic prejudices. See Manne, *Down Girl*, ch. 8. Needless to say, many people not only failed to recognize as much during the 2016 presidential election and after but continue to deny that their reactions were misogynistic.

[27] In order that pictures, movies, experiences, etc. might serve this function, they would have to play a role in the acquisition of moral knowledge different from that envisioned for them by what Sarah McGrath, in her discussion of related issues, has called "The Moderate View." According to the moderate view, "(i) whenever acquaintance with an event plays a role in a rational change of mind about some moral issue, it does so in virtue of improving the non-moral information available to the person, and (2) in any such case, that information could in principle have been gained in some other way" (McGrath, "Normative Ethics, Conversion, and Pictures as Tools of Moral Persuasion," p. 275). As McGrath herself notes, Mark Johnston has in effect gone some way toward developing an alternative to The Moderate View in his "The Authority of Affect." I do not want to endorse every detail of Johnston's account here, though I do think it goes in the right direction. Cf. Heidegger's discussion of the disclosive role of moods or attunement

In general, moral education can involve whatever it takes to enrich and expand one's moral imagination and bring one to see things aright.[28]

For the Virginian in particular, it might be particularly helpful to encounter an example—perhaps in real life, perhaps in a piece of literature or a film—of someone who demonstrates the possibility of a very different approach to the world.[29] Perhaps this person shuns talk of good and bad people in favor of talk of people who do good and bad things. Perhaps he insists that no one is irredeemable, illustrating the point with copious stories of redemption through education, therapy, and restorative justice processes. Perhaps this person invokes examples of Christian mercy, which seem particularly likely to resonate with the Virginian. In any case, encountering someone like this might well open the Virginian's eyes to a very different way of comporting himself, at least provided the Virginian found him or her sufficiently relatable and trustworthy.

If this sort of thing is indeed possible, then the fact that we can make mistakes about which challenges to our view are and which aren't intelligible need not entail that we are undetectably reliable in ethics. For we may strive to open ourselves up to possibilities that strike us as bizarre and submit ourselves to others' tutelage, and provided that we pursue our own edification with sufficient tenacity and that, if necessary, we can find teachers who are sufficiently dedicated, we will often be able to detect even the most stubborn errors.

To be clear, I do not mean to say that such methods are *necessarily* effective means to recognizing the intelligibility of radically different ways of thinking. More likely than not, some students just will not respond in the usual ways to instruction, no matter how tenacious we are as teachers. Some readers might think this concession threatens to undermine my defense of the

---

(*Befindlichkeit*) in *Being and Time* part one, div. I, sec. V, par. 29.

[28] I think it fair to say that something like this thought animates Aristotle's ethical thought and much of both Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's thinking. More recently, Nigel DeSouza has sketched out one way the idea might be fleshed out with regard to ethical thought in a provocative essay called "Pre-Reflective Ethical Know-How."

[29] Such a person would be a work of art in the sense Heidegger spelled out in "On the Origin of the Work of Art"—as is the judge in *Blood Meridian*.

possibility that we might detect errors in our thinking and, *eo ipso*, my defense of the possibility of acquiring ethical knowledge via reflection. For, they might note, this is just to say that, at least for some people, the relevant errors *are* undetectable. But this is a mistake. At most, it follows that not everyone is capable of acquiring moral knowledge. The fact that some people will fail in their attempts to detect errors in their thinking no matter how hard they try and no matter how good and dedicated their teachers are could be a *general* obstacle to the acquisition of ethical knowledge only if knowledge were not possible anywhere. For in *no* domain—not even mathematics or logic—are there educational methods such that we can *guarantee* they will work on any student whatsoever; there are only methods that *usually* work. Since, however, this phenomenon gives us no reason to think knowledge impossible in these other domains, it is not clear why it should in ethics. The fact that the educational methods available to us in ethics are not foolproof in this sense is accordingly not a problem for my position so long as they are—like the methods in other domains—usually effective, at least if pursued with sufficient tenacity by both teacher and student. And to me, at least, it seems they are.

4.5. Intelligibility and Nonsense

Next, it might be thought that my claims about the intelligibility of the skeptic's questions tacitly presuppose some theory of meaning or criterion of intelligibility, some antecedent view in light of which I am declaring defective the questions the skeptic want to ask. I can think of two ways of fleshing out this objection.

On the one hand, it might be thought that I am taking for granted some general criterion of intelligibility akin to that sought by at least some of the logical empiricists. For example, Ayer, or at least the Ayer of *Language, Truth and Logic*, seems to have taken himself to have discovered a kind of algorithm for determining, in any given case, whether sentence is meaningful: "a sentence is factually

significant to any given person," he tells us, "if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express—that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false."[30]

On the other, the concern might stem from certain ideas about the nature of nonsense. Over the last twenty years or so, there has been a vigorous debate between proponents of two different conceptions of nonsense, the so-called "substantial" and "austere" conceptions.[31] The substantial conception, James Conant explains,

> distinguishes between two different kinds of nonsense: mere nonsense and substantial nonsense. Mere nonsense is simply unintelligible—it expresses no thought. Substantial nonsense is composed of intelligible ingredients combined in an illegitimate way—it expresses a logically incoherent thought. According to the substantial conception, these two kinds of nonsense are logically distinct: the former is mere gibberish, whereas the latter involves (what commentators on the *Tractatus* are fond of calling) a "violation of logical syntax" or (what commentators on Wittgenstein's later work are fond of calling) a "violation of grammar." The substantial conception of nonsense can be contrasted with another conception of nonsense, which I will call the *austere conception of nonsense*. According to the latter, mere nonsense is, from a logical point of view, the only kind of nonsense there is.[32]

Those familiar with this debate will have a variety of questions for me. Which of these two conceptions do I endorse? Either way, on what grounds? If I endorse the substantial conception, am I suggesting that the underdetermination-based skeptic's questions are substantial or only mere nonsense? And, finally, if they are supposed to be substantial nonsense, which syntactic or grammatical rules are they supposed to violate?

I'll take the objections in order, beginning with the first. I see the debate between people, like Ayer, who think it's possible to formulate some such criterion and others, like Austin and at least the later Wittgenstein, who are more skeptical about that, as analogous to the debate about

---

[30] A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 35.
[31] See, *inter alia*, James Conant "Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein," "Two Conceptions of *Die Überwindung der Metaphysik*," "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use," and "Three Ways of Inheriting Austin"; Cora Diamond, "On What Nonsense Might Be" and "Ethics and Imagination in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*"; Hans-Johann Glock, "All Kinds of Nonsense" and "Nonsense Made Intelligible"; Edmund Dain, "Wittgenstein, Contextualism, and Nonsense: A Reply to Hans-Johann Glock"; Lars Hertzberg, "The Sense is Where You Find It"; and Silver Bronzo, "Context, Compositionality, and Nonsense in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*."
[32] Conant, "Two Conceptions of *Die Überwindung der Metaphysik*," p. 14.

particularism in ethics. Just as ethical particularists regard it as a deeply context-sensitive question whether and how various considerations bear on the truth of a given ethical claim, Austin and Wittgenstein take it that questions as to whether or not a given sentence or utterance is intelligible can only be settled by considering the way in which it is being used on the relevant occasion. (In this sense, you could say, they are committed to a radicalized version of Frege's context principle.) Moreover, just as particularists deny the possibility of formulating a principle or set or principles that would enable us to eliminate the need for *phronesis*, Austin and Wittgenstein think that attempts to formulate a criterion of intelligibility of the kind Ayer thought he had found are, accordingly, hopeless. My sympathies here lie with Austin and Wittgenstein. Hence my appeals to ordinary usage and questions about how words are being used in the relevant contexts. Consequently, nothing I have said is meant to presuppose a criterion akin to that sought by Ayer.

Turn now to the second objection. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, I can afford to be neutral as to who is right in the debate between proponents of the substantial and those of the austere view of nonsense. Certainly there is such a thing as so-called mere nonsense; on my view, the "really" questions on which the epistemological challenge depends are examples. But, I can afford to allow, there may also be such a thing as substantial nonsense. In any case, nothing in my case against the skeptic *depends* on any claims about the existence of substantial nonsense; nor, *a fortiori*, am I committed to any particular view about the rules of combination our words have to obey if they are to be, as Conant puts it, "logically coherent."

To be clear, in saying that these questions are, in this sense, mere nonsense, I don't mean to be endorsing Conant's suggestion, in the passage above, that they are "mere gibberish." Like the term "nonsense" itself, that way of putting the point has polemical connotations I don't intend. I am claiming no more than that it is not clear how we are supposed to make sense of or understand the questions the relevant arguments depend on our being able to understand. To be sure, there are

various uses to which the relevant words *might* be put. But as I argued in the chapter two, none of those uses are of any help to the skeptic.

4.6. Isn't It Rather the Realist Who is Caught Up in Fantasy?

Finally, some will also object that I am being unfair to Street and like-minded skeptics, that it is in fact not them but the realist who has lost himself in philosophical fantasy. Micah Lott, for example, put the point to me as follows:

> it seems that Street will insist that it is the realist who has opened up the super-gulf, not her. The sense of "really wrong" [that I have suggested is confused] is not supplied by Street, but borrowed from what the moral realist has already asserted – that there are moral facts that are "stance-independent", such that no matter how things looked or seemed from "within" our points of view, the moral truths might still be otherwise. We could all be wrong, just as everyone was wrong in thinking that the sun went around the earth, rather than vice-versa. And that goes for even claims like "it is wrong knowingly to put someone in harm's way".[33]

As I see it, there are two closely-related points being made here that are worth distinguishing: first, that the realist is caught up in philosophical fantasy, and second, that Street and like-minded skeptics are not. I will say a bit about each of these claims, beginning with the first.

I am happy to grant the objector that realism as it is most often understood and elaborated—both by its opponents and by its proponents—is indeed a fantastic doctrine that allows for the (pseudo-)possibility that super-gulfs might open up between our beliefs and the facts. My contention is not that no realist is thus caught up in fantasy, but rather just that they needn't be: as I've explained, clear-headed realists might at once refuse to countenance the intelligibility of super-gulfs and maintain the objectivity—or as Lott, following Russ Shafer-Landau, puts it, the stance-independence—of ethical facts.[34] My criticisms of Street and like-minded skeptics are therefore no less applicable to realists of a certain sort (namely those I have called explanatory realists). To that

[33] Personal communication. Nandi Theunissen, Mario Brandhorst, and Sharon Street also raised versions of this objection.
[34] Shafer-Landau introduces this term at *Moral Realism: A Defense*, p. 15.

extent I agree with the objection.

As for whether or not Street and like-minded skeptics have themselves gotten caught up in the kind of philosophical fantasy that makes questions of this latter sort seem to be of the utmost importance, I think it is clear—*pace* Street, Lott, and others—that there is a sense in which they have. Regarding Street in particular, that her thinking about these issues is thoroughly permeated by fantasy is clear from the fact that she allows proponents of fantastic forms of realism to set the very terms of the debate. Thus her criticism of realists is, not that they have lost themselves in a fantastic picture of the relationship between our beliefs and the facts, but that they cannot *rule out* the possibility that super-gulfs yawn between our beliefs and the facts. We also see evidence of Street's embrace of the realist's fantasy in the way that she thinks about constructivism's advantages over realism. Her thought appears to be that, because it views ethical facts as constructions or functions of our attitudes, constructivism can do what realism cannot: it can help us to assure ourselves that no super-gulfs yawn between our beliefs and the facts.[35] For whereas the fantastic realist is nonplussed by the questions obsession with and consternation over which I've suggested are the hallmark of fantastic thought—sure, everything points to its being the case that P, but is it *really*?—the constructivist has an easy answer: yes, if the belief that P would be among your beliefs were they in reflective equilibrium, no otherwise. Had she seen how deeply confused are these questions—had she seen this philosophical fantasy for what it is—she would neither have leveled against the realist the criticism she does nor viewed the fact that it enables us to rule out the pseudo-possibility that a super-gulf yawns between one of our beliefs and reality as an advantage of her constructivism. After all, it is not exactly an advantage of one's position that it makes possible a solution to a pseudo-problem.

Finally, one more aspect of Lott's objection calls for comment. In the passage above, he

[35] See McDowell's comments on p. 94 of *Mind and World* for a general description of this common move in philosophy. Street, we could say, wants to build a bridge to the facts using materials available on one side of a super-gulf.

writes that realists are committed to the view that, so far as our ethical views go, "we could all be wrong, just as everyone was wrong in thinking that the sun went around the earth, rather than vice-versa." I think this gets things doubly wrong. It is wrong, first, because as I have said, realists need not be committed to the claim that we could all be wrong in the sense Lott intends. But it is also wrong because the analogy he invokes here fails to illustrate his point. When Copernicus asked whether or not the geocentric model of the universe was correct, he wasn't asking if there was a super-gulf between its proponents' beliefs and the facts. Its revolutionary potential notwithstanding, his question was about a run-of-the-mill belief-fact gulf. He observed that some of the available evidence seemed better explained by an alternative hypothesis (the heliocentric model of the universe) and asked, in light of that observation, whether that alternative hypothesis might be true instead of the geocentric model. There is no attempt to here to call into question the basic norms of empirical inquiry.

Conclusion

In chapter one, I argued that the most compelling version of the debunking challenge is best understood as follows:

1. If S believes that her belief that P is not e-connected, then S's belief that P is not justified, and S is rationally committed to withholding belief that P.[1]
2. Realists are committed to denying that our moral beliefs explain the moral facts.
3. Realists might therefore affirm that our moral beliefs are e-connected only by affirming that those facts explain our beliefs
4. However, there is compelling evidence that that is not the case. In particular, the best, complete explanation of why we form the moral beliefs we do—namely, a broadly Darwinian one—neither presupposes nor entails their truth.
5. Realists, then, are committed to denying that our moral beliefs are e-connected.
6. Assuming realism, none of our moral beliefs are justified, and, for every moral proposition P, we are rationally committed to withholding belief that P.

I suggested that the mistake lies with premise (4). In fact, I argued, the best, complete explanation of our beliefs may and at least sometimes does entail the truth of our beliefs, since we sometimes form beliefs by means of critical ethical reflection, carefully examining the various possibilities and evidence so as to ensure that we see things aright.

I outlined three rejoinders debunkers might offer at this point. According to the first, an explanation of our moral beliefs that appeals to our capacity to know moral reality by way of

[1] This is a slightly modified version of the relevant claim in Korman and Locke, "Against Minimalist Responses," §8; cf. Korman, "Debunking Arguments," §8.

reflection is redundant, since we can explain our beliefs just as well if we instead appeal only to our antecedent views and moral sensibilities. According to the second, if realism is true, we lack the capacity to acquire moral knowledge through reflection, since in that case, the evidence available to us in ethical reflection necessarily underdetermines the truth of our beliefs. The third rejoinder, I said, is in fact better understood as two distinct objections, Benacerraf's Challenge and Field's Challenge. Benacerraf's Challenge contends that there is a causal or explanatory condition on knowledge that our beliefs cannot satisfy if realism is true; Field's Challenge contends that realists cannot adequately explain how we could be reliable about ethical matters. Both have the effect of problematizing my appeal to our capacity to acquire moral knowledge through reflection.

These first two rejoinders, I argued in chapter two, rely on a confused conception of the ways we are liable to go wrong in ethical reflection—on what I called a philosophical fantasy. In response to Benacerraf's Challenge, I defended an explanatory account of the no accident condition on knowledge I called NO ACCIDENT; in addition, I argued for a novel, teleological account of how our beliefs can satisfy NO ACCIDENT, an account I called GETTING IT RIGHT ON PURPOSE. Finally, in response to Field's Challenge, I appealed to a deflationary form of realism I called simple realism to argue that, to explain our capacity to come to know objective ethical facts by way of reflection, we need only appeal to our capacity to draw on our understanding of the linguistic-conceptual rules mastery of which is required for linguistic competence to determine whether or not some term or concept applies in a given circumstance.

Taken together, these responses to debunkers have the effect of undercutting premise (4) of the debunking argument in two ways. First, they illustrate that, debunkers' insistence to the contrary notwithstanding, we have not been given compelling reasons to doubt that, in at least some cases, the best complete explanation of our moral beliefs entails their truth. Second, my responses to Benacerraf's Challenge and to Field's Challenge explain how it can be the case that our ethical beliefs

are e-connected to ethical facts (where, recall, the belief that P is *e-connected* iff it is explained by or explains some facts in the domain P is about). If I am right, the connection consists in the fact that, when things go well, their truth is the final cause of our beliefs. This is a good thing, since in my view, premise (1) is correct: that they are e-connected to facts in the relevant domain is a necessary condition of justification.

This response to debunkers contributes to the literature by substantially developing a response that has received surprisingly little attention. In fact, and as I noted in chapter one, it only seems to have been endorsed by one other philosopher, William Fitzpatrick, who has not developed this thought to anywhere near the extent I have here. In addition, I have drawn on Wittgenstein's work in a way that, to my knowledge, no other Wittgensteinian ethicist has and developed and defended a teleological account of the possibility of non-accidentally true belief that, again, appears to be unprecedented. Finally, I have outlined a deflationary form of realism that is inspired by and extends Amie Thomasson's so-called "normativist" approach to modality.

Even so, there is considerable room for further development. For one thing, a fuller treatment would develop simple realism in a number of respects. The analogy between ethical reflection and complex skills like playing music deserves more elaboration, as does the story about the social aspects of moral cognition at which I hinted in §4.4 above. Moreover, there is room to worry, as Setiya does about some of the views he discusses, that the form of simple realism I have outlined predicts more convergence in ethical views than we actually see or precludes the possibility that entire communities might go astray. A fuller treatment would need to reckon with these concerns. Finally, there are other general challenges to realism requiring a response. These include the so-called supervenience challenge, which asks why it should be the case that ethical facts supervene on non-ethical ones;[2] challenges to cognitivism stemming from worries about how

[2] For discussion, see Bader, "The Grounding Argument."

knowledge could be practical, or how ethical knowledge could engage our motives in the way it characteristically does; worries about how moral expressions refer;[3] and disagreement-related challenges to cognitivism of the sort that have recently been pressed by Richard Rowland.[4]

Finally, there is a deep problem about the very possibility of epistemic agency that this discussion has so far left untouched. The dissertation takes up challenges to the possibility of knowledge or justified belief stemming from facts about the influences on the content of our belief or our moral reasoning faculties, contending in effect that these arguments fail to take sufficiently seriously the possibility that our beliefs may be shaped, in addition, through the exercise of epistemic agency. In reality, I've suggested, we needn't be the hapless victims of our circumstances these arguments take us to be—the epistemic equivalents, I said, of a boat whose captain has absconded; instead, we can take the helm, thinking carefully about whether or not to indulge our various inclinations with a view to ensuring that our beliefs match the facts. Yet there is a deep problem, different from but related to those I have discussed, about how this could be so much as possible, a problem that parallels worries about free will and moral responsibility. Given a broadly naturalistic viewpoint, we can ask, how is it even possible to be epistemically responsible for our beliefs? Moreover, how can we make room for the possibility of holding each other epistemically responsible without embracing an implausible form of doxastic voluntarism that, besides involving dubious metaphysical commitments, seems likely to preclude the possibility that we are sometimes less open to criticism for holding mistaken or reprehensible beliefs when those beliefs are at least partly explained by our circumstances?

The issues here are difficult and complicated, and answers are unlikely to come easily. Fortunately, these are problems for another day. For now, it is enough to have explained why the

[3] For discussion, see McPherson, "Semantic Challenges to Normative Realism."
[4] See Rowland, "The Intelligibility of Moral Intransigence" and "The Significance of Significant Fundamental Moral Disagreement."

mere fact that our thinking about how to live is subject to irrelevant influences needn't entail that our ethical beliefs are unjustified or irrational.

Bibliography

Austin, J.L. "A Plea for Excuses." In *Philosophical Papers*, edited by J.O. Urmson and Warncock, 123-152. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.

-----. *Sense and Sensibilia*. Edited by G.J Warncock. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.

Ayer, A.J. *Language, Truth, and Logic*. 2nd ed. New York: Dover, 1952.

Bader, Ralf. "The Grounding Argument against Non-Reductive Moral Realism." In *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 12, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 106-134. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Baptist, Edward E. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books, 2014.

Bedke, Matthew. "No Coincidence?" In *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 9, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 102-125. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Benacerraf, Paul. "Mathematical Truth." *The Journal of Philosophy* 70, no. 19 (1973): 661-679.

Bengson, John. "Grasping the Third Realm." In *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, vol. 5, edited by Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne, 1-38. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Bertram, Christopher. *Do States Have the Right to Exclude Immigrants?* Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018.

Braddock, Matthew. "Debunking Arguments from Insensitivity." *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 7 (2017): 91-113.

Brosnan, Kevin. "Do the Evolutionary Origins of Our Moral Beliefs Undermine Moral Knowledge?" *Biology and Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (January 2011): 51–64.

Bronzo, Silver. "Context, Compositionality, and Nonsense in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*." In *Beyond the Tractatus Wars: The New Wittgenstein Debate*, edited by Rupert Read and Matthew A. Lavery, 84-111. New York: Routledge, 2011.

-----. "Wittgenstein, Theories of Meaning, and Linguistic Disjunctivism." *European Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (2017): 1340-1363.

Carnap, Rudolf. "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology." *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 4, no. 11 (January 1950): 20-40.

Cavell, Stanley. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

-----. "Must We Mean What We Say?" In *Must We Mean What We Say?*, updated edition, 1-40. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

-----. *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006.

Clarke-Doane, Justin. "Debunking and Dispensability." In *Explanation in Ethics and Mathematics: Debunking and Dispensability*, edited by Neil Sinclair and Uri Leibowitz. Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

-----. "Justification and Explanation in Mathematics and Morality." In *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 10, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau. Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

-----. "Morality and Mathematics: The Evolutionary Challenge." *Ethics* 122, no. 2 (January 2012): 313-340.

-----. "What is the Benacerraf Problem?" In *New Perspectives on the Philosophy of Paul Benacerraf*, edited by Fabrice Pataut, 17-43. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016.

Crary, Alice. *Beyond Moral Judgment*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Crary, Alice and Rupert Read, eds. *The New Wittgenstein*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Crow, Daniel. "Causal Impotence and Evolutionary Influence." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 19 (2016): 379-395.

Conant, James. "Elucidation and Nonsense in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*." In Crary and Read, *The New Wittgenstein*, 174-217.

——. "Three Ways of Inheriting Austin." In *La philosophie du langage ordinaire: Histoire et actualité de la philosophie d'Oxford / Ordinary Language Philosophy: The History and Contemporary Relevance of Oxford Philosophy,* edited by Christoph Al-Saleh and Sandra Laugier, 395-415. Hildesheim: Olms Verlag, 2011.

-----. "Two Conceptions of *Die Überwindung der Metaphysik*." In McCarthy and Stidd, *Wittgenstein in America*, 13-61.

-----. "Two Varieties of Skepticism." In *Rethinking Epistemology*, Vol. 2, edited by Guenter Abel and James Conant, 1-73. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012.

-----. "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use." *Philosophical Investigations* 21, no. 3 (July 1998): 222-250.

Copp, David. "Darwinian Skepticism about Moral Realism." *Philosophical Issues* 18, Interdisciplinary Core Philosophy (2008): 186-206.

Cuneo, Terrence and Russ Shafer-Landau. "New Directions for Moral Nonnaturalism: the Moral Fixed Points." *Philosophical Studies* 171 (January 2014): 399-443.

Dain, Edmund. "Wittgenstein, Contextualism, and Nonsense: A Reply to Hans-Johann Glock." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 33 (2008): 101-125.

Davidson, Donald. "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1973-1974): 5-20.

-----. "Radical Interpretation." *Dialectica* 27, no. 3/4 (1973): 313-328.

Decker, Jason and Daniel Groll. "On the (In)Significance of Moral Disagreement for Moral Knowledge." In *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 8, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 140-166. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

DeSouza, Nigel. "Pre-Reflective Ethical Know-How." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16 (2013): 279-294.

Dreyfus, Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus. "Toward a Phenomenology of Ethical Expertise." *Human Studies* 14, no. 4 (1991): 229-250.

Dworkin, Ronald. *Life's Dominion: An Argument about Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom*. New York: Vintage, 1994.

-----. "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 87-139.

Diamond, Cora. "Realism and the Realistic Spirit." In *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*, 39-72. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995.

-----. "What Nonsense Might Be." In *The Realistic Spirit*, 95-114.

Dreier, Jamie. "Quasi-realism and the Problem of Unexplained Coincidence." *Analytic Philosophy* 53, no. 3 (2012): 269–287.

Dummett, Michael. "Realism." In *Truth and Other Enigmas*, 145-165. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.

Enoch, David. "The Epistemological Challenge to Metanormative Realism: How Best to Understand It, and How to Cope with It." *Philosophical Studies* 148 (April 2010): 413-38.

-----. *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Evers, Daan and Bart Streumer. "Are the Moral Fixed Points Conceptual Truths?" *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* (March 2016).

Faraci, David. "Groundwork for an Explanationist Account of Epistemic Coincidence." Forthcoming in *Philosophers' Imprint*.

Field, Hartry. *Realism, Mathematics and Modality*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

Finkelstein, David H. "Wittgenstein on Rules and Platonism." In *The New Wittgenstein*, edited by Crary and Read, 53-73.

Fitzpatrick, William J. "Debunking Evolutionary Debunking of Ethical Realism." *Philosophical Studies* 172 (2015): 883-904.

-----. "Misidentifying the Evolutionary Debunkers' Error: Reply to Mogensen." *Analysis* 76, no. 4 (October 2016): 433-437.

-----. "Why There is No Darwinian Dilemma for Ethical Realism." In *Challenges to Moral and Religious Belief: Disagreement and Evolution*, edited by Michael Bergmann and Patrick Kain, 237-254. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Foot, Philippa. *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Fraser, Benjamin. "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments and the Reliability of Moral Cognition." *Philosophical Studies* 168 (2014): 457-473.

Gettier, Edmund L. "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23, no. 6 (1963): 121-123.

Gibbard, Allan. *Thinking How to Live*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Glock, Hans-Johann. "All Kinds of Nonsense." In *Wittgenstein at Work: Method in the Philosophical Investigations*, edited by Erich Ammereller and Eugen Fischer, 221-245. London: Routledge, 2004.

-----. "Nonsense Made Intelligible." *Erkenntnis* 80, supplement (March 2015): 111-136.

Goldman, Alvin. "A Causal Theory of Knowing." *The Journal of Philosophy* 64, no. 12 (1967): 357-372.

-----. "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge." *The Journal of Philosophy* 73, no. 20 (1976): 771-791.

Harman, Gilbert. *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.

-----. "The Origin of the Work of Art." In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 15-86. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Hertzberg, Lars. "The Sense is Where You Find It." In McCarthy and Stidd, *Wittgenstein in America*, 90-102.

Homer. *Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974.

Horwich, Paul. *Truth*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

Huemer, Michael. *Ethical Intuitionism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Ingram, Stephen. "Are Moral Error Theorists Intellectually Vicious?" *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (March 2018): 80-89.

-----. "The Moral Fixed Points: Reply to Cuneo and Shafer-Landau." *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2015): 1-6.

James, Aaron. "Constructing Protagorean Objectivity." In *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*, ed. James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer, 60-80. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Johnston, Mark. "The Authority of Affect." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63, no. 1 (July 2001): 181-214.

Jones, Reece. *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*. London: Verso, 2016.

Joyce, Richard. *The Evolution of Morality*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006.

Kalderon, Mark Eli. *Moral Fictionalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

King, Nathan. "McGrath on Moral Knowledge." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 36 (2011): 219-233.

-----. "Rejoinder to McGrath." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 36 (2011): 243-246.

Korman, Daniel. "Debunking Arguments in Metaethics and Metaphysics." In *Metaphysics and Cognitive Science*, ed. Alvin Goldman and Brian McLaughlin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

Korman, Daniel and Dustin Locke. "Against Minimalist Responses to Moral Debunking Arguments." Forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*.

Kyriacou, Christos. "Moral Fixed Points and Conceptual Deficiency: Reply to Ingram (2015)." *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 11, no. 3 (March 2017): 1-9.

Lance, Mark. "The Functions of Moral Practice." Unpublished manuscript.

Lance, Mark and Margaret Little. "Defeasibility and the Normative Grasp of Context." *Erkenntnis* 61, no. 3 (November 2004): 435-455.

-----. "Defending Moral Particularism." In *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, edited by James Dreier, 305-321. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.

-----. "From Particularism to Defeasibility in Ethics." In *Challenging Moral Particularism* , edited by Mark Norris Lance, Matjaž Potrč, and Vojko Strahovnik, 53-74. New York: Routledge, 2008.

-----. "Particularism and Anti-Theory." In *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* , edited by David Copp, 567-591. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

-----. "Where the Laws Are." *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 2, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 149-171. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Leiter, Brian. "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Recovering Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud." In *The Future for Philosophy*, edited by Brian Leiter, 74-105. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Lewis, David. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.

The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi. New York: The Heritage Press, 1965.

Locke, Dustin. "Darwinian Normative Skepticism." In *Challenges to Moral and Religious Belief*, ed. Michael Bergmann and Patrick Cain, 220–35. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Lott, Micah. "Must Realists Be Skeptics? An Aristotelian Reply to a Darwinian Dilemma." *Philosophical Studies* 175, no. 1 (2018): 71-96.

Mackie, J.L. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. New York: Penguin, 1977.

Majors, Brad. "Moral Explanation." *Philosophy Compass* 2 (2007): 1–15.

Manne, Kate. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Marx, Karl. *The German Ideology*. In *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 5, translated by Richard Dixon. New York: International Publishers, 1976.

McBee, Joshua D. "The Stoics on Learning to Be Good." Unpublished manuscript.

-----. "The Virtuous Person as Master." Unpublished manuscript.

McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. New York: Vintage, 1992.

McCarthy, Timothy G. and Sean C. Stidd, eds. *Wittgenstein in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

McDowell, John. "Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics." In *The Engaged Intellect*, 23-40. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

-----. "Meaning and Intentionality in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy." In MVR, 263-278.

-----. "Might There Be External Reasons?" In MVR, 95-111.

-----. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

-----. *Mind, Value, and Reality* (MVR). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

-----. "Motivating Inferentialism: Comments on Chapter 2 of *Making It Explicit*." In *The Engaged Intellect*, 288-307.

-----. "Toward Rehabilitating Objectivity." In *The Engaged Intellect*, 204-224. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

-----. "Two Sorts of Naturalism." In MVR, 167-197.

-----. "Virtue and Reason." In MVR, 50-73.

-----. "Wittgenstein on Following a Rule." In MVR, 221-262.

McGrath, Sarah. "Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise." In *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 4, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 87-108. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

-----. "Moral Realism without Convergence." *Philosophical Topics* 38, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 59-90.

-----. "Normative Ethics, Conversion, and Pictures as Tools of Moral Persuasion." In *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics* 1 (2011): 268-294.

-----. "Reply to King." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 36 (2011): 235-241.

McNaughton, David. "An Unconnected Heap of Duties?" *The Philosophical Quarterly* 46, no. 185 (October 1996): 433-447.

McPherson, Tristram. "Against Quietist Normative Realism." *Philosophical Studies* 154, no. 2 (June 2011): 223-240.

-----. "Semantic Challenges to Normative Realism." *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 2 (2013): 126-136.

Mills, Charles. "White Ignorance." In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, 13-38. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007.

Mogensen, Andreas. "Do Evolutionary Debunking Arguments Rest on a Mistake about Evolutionary Explanations?" *Philosophical Studies* 173, no. 7 (July 2016): 1799-1817.

-----. "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments and the Proximate/Ultimate Distinction." *Analysis* 75, no. 2 (April 2015): 196-203.

Moore, Ian A. "Heraclitus and the Metaphysics of War in Blood Meridian." In *Philosophical Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Beyond Reckoning*, edited by Chris Eagle, 93-108. London: Routledge, 2017.

Nolan, Daniel P. "Impossible Worlds." *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 4 (2013): 360-372.

Nozick, Robert. *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

-----. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Pritchard, Duncan. *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

-----. *Epistemic Luck*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Pryor, James. "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist." *Noûs* 34, no. 4 (2000): 517–549.

Putnam, Hilary. "Are Values Made or Discovered?" In *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*, 96-110. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

-----. *Ethics Without Ontology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Quinn, Warren. "Putting Rationality in Its Place." In *Morality and Action*, 228-255. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.

Rowland, Richard. "The Intelligibility of Moral Intransigence: A Dilemma for Cognitivism about Moral Judgment." Forthcoming in *Analysis*.

-----. "The Significance of Significant Fundamental Moral Disagreement." *Noûs* 51, no. 4 (December 2017): 802-831.

Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey, ed. *Essays on Moral Realism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Searle, John. *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: The Free Press, 1995.

Setiya, Kieran. *Knowing Right from Wrong*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Schafer, Karl. "Evolution and Normative Skepticism." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 88, no. 3 (September 2010): 471-88.

-----. "Knowledge and Two Forms of Non-Accidental Truth." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 89, no. 2 (September 2014): 373-393.

Schechter, Joshua. "Explanatory Challenges in Metaethics." In *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics*, edited by Tristram McPherson and David Plunkett, 443-459. New York: Routledge, 2018.

-----. "The Reliability Challenge and the Epistemology of Logic." *Philosophical Perspectives* 24, Epistemology (2010): 437-64.

Shafer-landau, Russ. *Moral Realism: A Defence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Sherman, Ben. "Moral Disagreement and Epistemic Advantages." *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* 8, no. 3 (November 2014): 1-19.

Skarsaune, Knut. "Darwin and Moral Realism." *Philosophical Studies* 152 (2011): 229-243.

Stanley, Jason. *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Street, Sharon. "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value." *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (January 2006): 109-166.

-----. "Evolution and the Normativity of Epistemic Reasons." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 35, supplemental volume on *Belief and Agency*, edited by David Hunter (2011): 213-248.

-----. "In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference: Ideally Coherent Eccentrics and the Contingency of What Matters." *Philosophical Issues* 19, Metaethics (2009): 273-298.

-----. "Mind-Independence Without the Mystery." In *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 6, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 1-32. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

-----. "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Rethink It." In *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 11, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 293-334. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Sturgeon. "Moral Explanations." In Sayre-McCord, *Essays on Moral Realism*, 229-255.

Suikkanen, Jussi. "Williamson and (Moral) Realism." *PEA Soup*, March 27, 2008, http://peasoup.typepad.com/peasoup/2008/03/williamson-and.html (accessed 5/31/18).

Thomasson, Amie L. "How Can We Come to Know Metaphysical Modal Truths?" Forthcoming in *Synthese*.

-----. "Modal Normativism and the Methods of Metaphysics." *Philosophical Topics* 35, no. 1/2, Metaphysics (Spring/Fall 2007): 135-160.

-----. "Non-Descriptivism about Modality: A Brief History and Revival." *Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic and Communication* 4, 200 Years of Analytical Philosophy (2009): 1-26.

-----. "Norms and Necessity." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51, no. 2 (2013): 143–160.

-----. *Ontology Made Easy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Tropman, Elizabeth. "Formulating Moral Objectivity." *Philosophia* 46, no. 4 (2018): 1023-1040.

Unger, Peter. "An Analysis of Factual Knowledge." *Journal of Philosophy* 65, no. 6 (1968): 157-170.

Vavova, Katia. "Debunking Evolutionary Debunking." In *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 9, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 76-101. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

-----. "Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism." *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 2 (2015): 104–116.

-----. "Irrelevant Influences." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96, no. 1(January 2018): 134-152.

Vitz, Rico. "Doxastic Voluntarism." *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at https://www.iep.utm.edu/doxa-vol/ (accessed 3/19/19).

Wallach, Rick. "Twenty-Five Years of *Blood Meridian*." *Southwestern American Literature* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 5-7.

Warren, Jared. "Epistemology versus Non-causal Realism." *Synthese* 194, no 5 (2017): 1643-1662.

Wedgwood, Ralph. "There Are Unknowable Moral Truths." PEA Soup, August 10, 2010, http://peasoup.typepad.com/peasoup/2010/08/there-are-unknowable-moral-truths.html (accessed 5/31/18).

Weisstein, Eric. "Goldbach Conjecture." From *Mathworld*, available at http://mathworld.wolfram.com/GoldbachConjecture.html (accessed 5/31/18).

Wielenberg, Erik J. "Ethics and Evolutionary Theory," *Analysis* 76 (2016): 502-515.

-----. "On the Evolutionary Debunking of Morality." *Ethics* 120 (2010): 441-464.

-----. *Robust Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Williams, Bernard. "Internal and External Reasons." In *Moral Luck*, 101-113. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Williamson, Timothy. *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Wister, Owen. *The Virginian*. 1902. Reprint, New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *The Blue and Brown Books*. New York: Harper & Row, 1958.

-----. *On Certainty*. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Translated by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: Harper and Row, 1972.

-----. *Philosophical Investigations*. Rev. 4th ed. Edited by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009.

-----. *Philosophical Remarks*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

-----. *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. 3rd ed. Edited by G.H. von Wright, Rush Rhees, and G.E.M. Anscombe. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978.

-----. *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung: Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. 3rd edition. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003.

-----. *Zettel*. Edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.

Wright, Crispin. *Truth and Objectivity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Yamada, Masahiro. "Getting it Right by Accident." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 83, no. 1 (July 2011): 72-105.

Biographical Note

Joshua McBee was born March 24, 1988 in Austin, Texas. From 2006 to 2010, he attended the University of North Texas, where he earned a BA in Philosophy *summa cum laude* with minors in German and Social Sciences and completed an honors thesis on skepticism about other minds. In 2011, he entered the PhD program in philosophy at Johns Hopkins University. While at Hopkins, he has given talks at several conferences, published a book review and a scholarly paper in peer-reviewed academic journals, and designed and taught an introductory ethics course and a course on ethical issues related to climate change and climate policy. He lives with his wife, Erika, in Rockville, Maryland.